

C. I. Young

Nightcreatures



Edited by Lidia Vianu

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Universitatea din București

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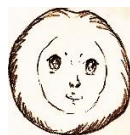
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What do *Nightcreatures* do?
They fly from the South to the North.
They tell stories in English on the way.
They draw what you cannot see.
They make friends.
Don't you want to join them?

Ce înseamnă *Nightcreatures* și ce fac ele?
Zboară din sud până în nord.
Povestesc în limba engleză.
Desenează ceea ce nu se vede.
Știu să-și facă prieteni.
Vino și tu să călătorești cu ei !

To Snoopy, who is always with us, even if we can't see him any more.



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C. I. Young**Nightcreatures. Ființe de noapte.**

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Editat de Lidia Vianu

I must have been three years old when my father used to read to me a page out of Nils Holgersson every night. When I was four, I had learned how to read, and read it to myself. I felt protected by that book. It was a book about loving the others and being loved right back. Yes, I was very much at ease while reading it. This was happening around the year 1950, at a time when fear reigned in communist Romania.

Suddenly, in 2021, in the middle of bullying, and mockery, and violence, I discover a book that takes me back then, to that age when I knew everything without knowing. I realize I had forgotten so much. Here I am, back in that world of love and peace: this time it is the world of C. I. Young's *Nightcreatures*. Read it to your children in order to show them what it means to feel protected by the entire universe. This book will teach both young and old readers how to live in a world of light.

Să tot fi avut eu trei ani pe vremea când tatăl meu îmi citea seara la culcare câte o pagină din Nils Holgersson. La patru ani știam deja să citesc și îmi citeam singură. Mă simțeam ocrotită pe când treceam prin acea lume în care toate ființele se iubeau una pe alta. Mi-era nespus de bine atunci când o citeam. Toate acestea se întâmplau în anul 1950, într-o Românie înneacă în comunism și frică.

În anul 2021, înconjurată de ființe agresive, disprețuitoare și nemiloase, descopăr, iată, o carte care mă duce înapoi la vârsta când știam totul fără să știu. Îmi dau seama – cu ce mirare – cât de multe lucruri am uitat de atunci. Mă aflu iar într-o lume de iubire și pace: lumea în care trăiesc *Nightcreatures*, ființele de noapte născocite de C. I. Young. Citiți copiilor voștri această carte, ca să simtă și ei că întregul univers îi ocrotește, ca să simțiți odată cu ei că ați gonit frica și existați în lumină.

Lidia Vianu

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3

PART I

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I was born here over the walls, I don't remember how long ago, but, ever since I can remember, every morning I have seen the sun rising among the ruins. The elders have told us the story of the old city, which they know from those before them. It is said that it was built by knights—great men in shining metal armours. When the knights went away, it was left to the people of the village, who took refuge here when the Barbarians invaded and cut and set fire and plundered everything in their way. And then one day the Barbarians stopped coming, and the people abandoned the fortress. The walls started to fall apart. Whenever there is a storm, another stone tumbles down.

I'm not alone, there are many of us up here. We were all born at the same time. At first we were flowers, then the wind of May blew away the petals, and we were left there. Ever since I was born I've been wearing the same coat. It grows with me, and I never take it off. I'll take it off only when I'm big enough to leave home. Until then everyone is afraid of it, no one touches me. I dream about the day when I will set forth on my journey, leaving everyone and everything behind, and starting up something of my own. I would like to stop in a big forest of fir trees, where there is no one else like me, so everyone who passes by can stop and admire me. But the forest I dream of is far, far away, up North, where the reindeer live, and where little elves hide their treasures underneath the roots of old trees. I think I'm hiding a treasure, too.

Every day I grow bigger, and every morning when I wake up I hold my breath until I see whether I'm in my place or if I've fallen down. I've got used to seeing the world from high up: the road where cars are always passing, the streets full of people, the school that children hurry to every morning. Everybody is in such a rush... sometimes it's better to grow roots somewhere and look at all the hurried people from afar. In the morning, birds gather on the walls to warm up, and every now and then a man comes to cut the grass growing in the fortress. He sings songs about daisies and roses. I've never seen a rose before, but I should like to meet one.

Last night there was a storm. I held on tight, but a few of us fell down, and the man took them away this morning with the hay.





Every day the sun rises later and sets sooner: perhaps it's a sign that I should get going while the day is still long. But now it's dark, and it has been such a long day. I'll see tomorrow.





A fresh start to a windy morning... Maybe today is the day. If I jump now, the wind might carry me a bit further, and afterwards I'll find my own way. I've packed my luggage, I don't think I've forgotten anything... and if I have I'll never be able to come back and get it anyway. So, goodbye everyone, I'm starting my journey today. Who knows, maybe we'll see each other again.

And down I go, falling through leaves, right over a pile of hay. I roll further down, faster and faster, avoiding stones and little bits of walls, until I'm out of the fortress and on the dirt road. I keep going, jumping over roots here, and there, down a street paved with stones. It's still early, people are sleeping. I pass through the garden of a house, just brushing a dog's muzzle. He opens his eyes, then lazily falls back asleep:

– Good morning! I'm leaving today.

He growls a little, and on I go, from street to street, until I reach the highway. Cars are passing this way and that... How shall I cross? I stop next to a sidewalk, and as I wait for cars to stop, a woman and her child step down. As if by magic, all the cars have stopped, so I hurry and roll along with them. As I jump onto the sidewalk, the little boy calls out: *"Mommy, look, a chestnut."* *"Oh, leave it, it's too small, it fell too soon from the tree."*

– I resent that, I'm not small, I'm just right, and I shall start the biggest chestnut tree the North has ever seen. Just you wait...

But, suddenly, the little boy runs towards me, and pulls his leg back, and... and... then he kicks me... Now, why did he have to do that? I may be small now, but one day my tree will be bigger than him, and even then I won't kick him... but I might drop a chestnut over him, as a small reminder. And down the street I go, hitting this pole, and that mailbox, and then somebody's shoes. I'm so dizzy I don't really know where I am. It feels as if I'm up in the tree again. My coat feels a little torn. What's this – who's pulling my coat off of me? What are you doing? My coat is gone and I'm sitting on top of the world in somebody's warm palm, in all my splendour, round and shiny and red like a fire.

– *"Tory, what have you got there?"*

– *"A chestnut, look, fresh out of its shell."*

– *"Well, keep it for good luck, put it in your pocket."*

– What a nice idea, keep me, won't you?

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– *"I'll do even better than that. I'll give it a name: Vic."*

How very nice, to make the acquaintance of someone who can even hear me.
And how warm this pocket feels. And from here I can see the whole world.

– *"Let's go now, we still have a long way ahead of us."*

– We do, really? Where are we going? Where, where?





Tory gets behind the wheel of a red car, and the woman who told her to take me with her gets in beside her. They must be mother and daughter. I never thought I'd ever travel by car. How quickly the trees pass on the sides of the road, the houses, the school, the church, until we are in the open road. And as we set forth to take on the mountains ahead, a slow September rain starts falling down, the little drops of water sound like whispers as they fall over the car. Fog is rising like a soft cloak over the mountains. In a few minutes everything is white. Right now we must be passing the hill where I grew up. It took some courage to leave my branch, and I know I can never go back again, but I shan't be one of those chestnuts who is always waiting for the right time, and ends up still clinging to its branch when September ends, only to fall down with the dry leaves.

So now I'm not just a chestnut any more, my name is Vic, I have a family and I'm on my way to conquer the North.

Tory turns on the radio and a song sweeter than the sound of a mountain creek slipping over rocks echoes. When it is over a voice announces: "*Fantaisie Impromptu* by Frédéric Chopin, and now we shall listen to a guitar concert by Antonio Vivaldi." The chords of the guitar give life to music centuries old, and as the notes get stronger and the music climbs in intensity, we start climbing the mountain, one turn after another. The road is narrow, and at times you can't see what lies beyond the curve; we don't slow down in expectation, though. Overtaking a car here and there, we've reached the top. The rain has stopped, but the mountain is enveloped in a cloud. Now that I am leaving, I feel I have a lot to do. I wish I could let them all know back home that I'm all right, that it is safe to leave the tree, for even if a little boy should kick you, you'll still end up where you're supposed to be. And down we start until we reach the open road again. The pocket is so soft and warm, I'll take a little nap, for just a few minutes. It's been such a busy morning...



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The car has stopped. I look around: houses, a long street, a little like my hometown.

— *"We'll walk the rest of the way. There is only a dirt road from here. Mom, don't forget the camera."*

And up we go. Along the path, on either side, old oak-trees full of giggling acorns.

— Hello, my name is Vic, and I'm on my way to the North.

— How funny!, they all keep laughing. A chestnut with a name!

— But I'm no ordinary chestnut, you see. I hold a tree inside, and I just can't wait to grow strong roots and stretch out branches wide enough to cover the sky.

— *"Here we are. I hope the gate is open."*

The huge old wooden door squeaks as Tory pushes it aside, and in we go. It's almost like home, fallen walls all around. Only it's bigger. There is a tower to the left. What a riot we've caused among the apple trees, and plum trees, and even the old wise lime tree wonders who we are. We walk around. Tory stops and puts her hands over a wall, carefully holding a stone.

— *"Can you believe a thousand years ago a man touched this very stone... And now here we stand, on the very spot where he must have stood, so close and yet so far apart."*

— *"Let's stop and have a picnic here, in the shade, Tory."*

And while they lay the blanket over the cold grass, they leave me in the picnic basket, just underneath an apple tree.

— Hello, my name is Vic.

— Why, hello! How very fortunate of you to have a name. No one has ever thought enough of me to give me one.

— I'll give you a name, if you like.

— Oh, I would, very much. Please do.

— Let's see... Are your apples sweet?

— No, my apples are a little sour, but extremely refreshing. They're perfect if eaten in mid-August, before the summer is over, but they're tasty even now.

— Do they turn bright red, or golden yellow?

— No, they stay as green as the fresh grass of spring.

— How do you make so many apples?

— As soon as winter's over, when the snow has melted, the sun begins to shine in spring, and I'm so happy then that I bloom all over. I just can't help myself. And then the flowers turn to apples. So, have you thought of a name yet?

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—How about Greensleeve? And because you've been here for many, many years, and because your thoughts are noble, and you know how to enjoy the sun, I shall call you Sir. Sir Greensleeve. Do you like it?

—Oh, I like it, I like it very much! the apple tree almost jumped out of its roots with joy, and, as it wiggled its branches with delight, a few apples fell right on the blanket.

—*"Apples, right out of the tree, too,"* Tory took one, rubbed it against her shirt, and bit. *"How delightful, not too sweet and not too sour. How refreshing."*

—Yes, those are my apples, the apples of Sir Greensleeve, the noble apple tree!

Tory's mother took out of the basket a thermos of fresh coffee and one of tea, muffins and scones, fresh bread and smoked salmon... They all smell nice. I've never truly had a meal. I only know water and sunlight. It must be nice to be able to taste so many different things, to have a little of everything.

—Excuse me, a coarse voice sounded through the air. Excuse me, chestnut. I wonder, could you help me? the lime tree asked.

—Sure, what can I do?

—Well, I should like to have a name, too.

—Have you been here long?

—Ever since I can remember. I was once just a flower, in a faraway land, but the wind blew me over here, centuries ago. I remember that trip quite well. When I let go of my branch, I didn't know where I would end up, and the wind blew me over forests and hills, and over a lake, too. I was quite scared of falling in the water... When I was halfway across the lake, the wind suddenly stopped, and I started going down, turning and turning... I couldn't look, so I closed my eyes... and then, as if by magic, I landed on something soft, not wet, not cold. I opened my eyes and I couldn't believe it: I had landed on the feathers of a wild duck. He and I became great friends. We spent so many days and nights out on the lake together, but in autumn he had to go to warmer lands to flee winter. I couldn't go with him, so on the way he dropped me here. Back then there were just wooden walls around the hill and a few houses scattered about. I started growing roots, and just a few years later I bloomed for the first time, and all the people would gather around me every evening to smell the perfume of my flowers and sing songs. And sometimes, late at night, when all the lights went out, young lovers would meet in my shade to look at the moon and talk about love. And later they would bring their children, and the young ones would climb my branches, and I would take great care not to let them fall. I miss the sound of children laughing. A century later brave warriors came, knights, and they built the

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stone walls and a church, and even a school. The tower you see used to be a sentry tower. It was a good thing they built those strong walls, for, soon after, hordes of Huns and Tartars came, and they burnt everything in their way. If it hadn't been for those walls, I might not be here today. And the men of the village fought bravely to defend me. After the battle was over, one of the knights came to rest on my roots, in the shade. I watched him take off his helmet and gloves, and his shield and boots... and underneath all that he turned out to be a man. And then he got on his knees and brought his hands together, looked up to the sky and said "Thank you." I said: You're welcome, but I'm not sure he heard me. When he took his helmet off, a small jewel he was wearing on a chain around his neck fell off, and I covered it with a few leaves, and then I grew roots over it, and it's still here; I'm keeping it safe for him, maybe one day he will come back to recover it. What name do you think would best suit me, then?

— Tell me, do your flowers turn into fruit?

— Not really, but after they're all dry, if you put them in boiling water, they make a wonderful scented potion that brings on the sweetest dreams to whomever drinks it.

— I shall name you Sir Limealot, for you have witnessed great acts of bravery.

— Thank you, Vic, I like my name. But please don't tell anyone about the locket. I shouldn't like to have thieves dig up my roots, and the knight will be very upset if he returns and doesn't find it. It will be our secret.

— Not to worry, I shan't whisper it to a leaf.

The lime tree lowered his branches in a sigh, and his leaves shuddered. Tory got up and put everything back in the basket, while her mother folded the blanket.

— "Let's take some photos here, with this wall." And she took me from the basket and placed me over the stone wall. Her mother took the photo: Sir Limealot, Tory, Sir Greensleeve all together, and if you look really close, there I am, too.





On the road again. The sun is setting. In the humid evening air it burns redder than ever, and then it slowly fades away, leaving behind a pale crimson sky, as a sign it was once there. The evening is a strange time of the day when the sky is empty, after the sun has disappeared beyond the hills, and before the moon has risen. The day passes so fast, but when the evening comes the clock begins to tick the seconds further apart.

— *"It has been a wonderful day. Thank you, mom."*

— *"You're welcome, thank you for taking me."*

— *"Here we are, and there's our hotel."*

It's dark already. The air is quite cold. What is a hotel? Tory goes in and talks to someone, she gets a key, and then comes back to take the luggage, and we go up the stairs. So many doors. So many voices coming from behind each door. Just like the tree I left. — Is this where you were born?

— *"Room 307, this is it."* The key fits in the lock, and in we go. The lights go on, and I find myself placed on a table next to a balcony. Tory and her mother go this way and that, from one room to the other. The balcony looks out on a forest of fir trees. The smell of resin comes in through the open door. Such a deep silence lies outside. And a little fluttering, like the fluttering of wings. Large wings. And even larger eyes.

— Who's there? Who are you?

— Good evening, chestnut.

— Good evening, my name is Vic.

— How do you do. Let me introduce myself: I am Wilfred Ernest Chester IV, Earl of Black Moor. Very pleased to make your acquaintance.

— Pardon me, but why the Fourth?

— Well, my other three brothers hatched out of their eggs before me. I was a little slow.

— You had a shell, too, then?

— Yes, I did. And, to be quite honest, I wouldn't have come out of it if that dense brother of mine hadn't pecked at me — Come out Wilfred! Come out! We need one more to play cricket with the mouse!

— Are you a bird?

— What a silly question. I suppose you could say that. But I'm no ordinary bird, like pigeons or sparrows. I'm an owl.

Saying that he lifted his head, pushed it forward and opened his eyes wide.

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— Oh, I see now. But why aren't you at home? It is quite late, you know.

— I sleep all day. At night I go out. It's much better like this. Everyone is asleep, I can fly as fast as I want from tree to tree, and there's no one to give me a ticket for speeding. Right now I'm looking for a mouse. We had one, but he got away.

— To eat him?

— Oh, no. We've refined our tastes. We prefer mushrooms and raspberries. So much easier to digest, and no unpleasant fur, either. No, we use them for cricket, as balls. We roll them down the branches into tree holes. It's really fun. Of course, you have to be able to fly in order to play.

— Oh...

— But don't be sad, I'll tell you what: I'll find a mouse, and you can be our referee.

— All right. What do I do?

— You observe us and count how many points we get: the mouse in the hole from just one move earns the player 10 points, two moves — 5 points, three moves — 1 point.

— I'll try to remember that.

— Then off I go to find a mouse.

And a few minutes later, the four brothers all sit on a branch on the tree in front of the window. Wilfred IV is carrying in his beak a mouse by its tail.

— I'll go first, one of them says. I hatched first.

— Oh, honest, will you hold that over us all our lives? You hatched, it's over, grow up. I should go first, I won the last time.

— Wilfred II, the only reason you won was because the mouse was so scared of you that it ran into the tree hole before you even hit it with your beak. I found the mouse, I should be first. But tonight we have a referee.

— Really? Who? Where?

— Hello, my name is Vic. I promise to be fair.

— Who do you think should go first? Wilfred I asked.

— Perhaps you should let the mouse choose.

— The mouse?! What a peculiar idea. And I like it, too, said Wilfred IV, putting the mouse down on the branch. Well? Speak mouse!

The poor mouse rolled up in a ball and wrapped his tail around himself.

— It's no use, that's all they know how to do, Wilfred I frowned.

— Let me try. Hello, Sir, my name is Vic, and I'm to be the referee for the game tonight, so I was wondering...





— I'm a mouse, I'm not deaf, the mouse stretched out. You think it makes much of a difference to me who hits me against every branch and pushes me to fall into tree holes? Do you really?

— What's your name, Sir?

— Whiskers, Long Whiskers, Mr Long Whiskers to you.

The owls all giggled:

— He calls that a name.

— Yes, that is my name, and I'm very proud of it. I come from a long line of Whiskers, I'll have you know. And what you're doing is... it's—antimousism. And I have rights, too. You can't just come and snatch me out of my den whenever you feel like playing, I'll have you know that. I...

The owls all surrounded him with eyes wide open and eyebrows raised, and they all spoke at once:

— Oh... can't we?

— Well... perhaps *you* can, but only you, the mouse looked down and grabbed his tail with his front paws, as if to defend himself with it.

— Gentlemen, perhaps Mr Whiskers is right, though. Perhaps you should all agree on a time when it suits you all to play. This way you won't have to fly around all night, looking for a mouse, and this way Mr Whiskers will have time for... whatever it is he needs time for.

— Hmmm, Wilfred IV growled. Well... all right. Let me get out my book... 6 o'clock dinner with mummy, 7 o'clock fly by the Owls' club, 8 o'clock Miss Pitch.

— Oh, really, Wilfred IV, you don't mean to say you like Miss Pitch... For flying over the ocean, you're out of your mind!

— And just what is wrong with her? Pray tell.

— She's a crow!

— It's none of your business, Wilfred I. And who are you to speak? I saw you brushing your feathers with Miss Quacks, the wild duck, Wilfred IV said.

— Really? Really? He did? Wait till I tell Mummy, Wilfred II jumped up and down the branch laughing.

— You breathe a word and I'll pluck you of all your feathers, and you'll have to fly around the forest naked.

— Don't get so upset, Wilfred I, I was only thinking of it as a possibility, but I would never do that, you're my brother. I've already forgotten about it. As a matter of fact, now that I remember, I never knew it.



— Let's all focus on what we started. I think I can fit it in at 10 o'clock. Is that all right for everyone?

The owls all agreed on it, then turned to the mouse:

— Well?

— It will be fine, I guess. I'll go to bed with a bang, literally.

— Good. Then we're all settled. What do you know, it's 10 o'clock now. Let the game begin! Wilfred IV opened his wings and screamed from the top of his lungs. Now... who was supposed to start? I'm afraid I can't remember.

— Mr Whiskers still hasn't decided yet.

— Oh, right, no wonder I can't remember it. Well? Who?

— Oh, pick me! Pick me! Wilfred II started jumping up and down again.

— Don't influence the mouse! Mr Whiskers I mean... Lovely name by the way, Wilfred I said as he moved closer to the mouse.

— Well, whom should I choose? Let's see... eeny, meeny, miny, moe... Can I pick the chestnut?

— No! they all lashed out.

— All right...

The mouse closed his eyes, picked up his tail, started pointing with it, turning and turning and when he stopped he was pointing to Wilfred IV.

— You, I guess... Oh... I'm so dizzy... and, saying that, he started wobbling from side to side, closer and closer to the edge of the branch, until he stepped off. Luckily Wilfred IV caught him by the tail.

— Ready everyone? Ready to count, Vic? Ready to go into the hole, Mr Whiskers? Here we go. And Wilfred IV, after having long calculated the best angle, the direction, pushed the rolled up mouse with his beak, and the mouse started tumbling down the branch.

— Ooooh... my head, oooh... my back, oooh... I'm getting too old for this.

And when the game was over I announced the winner: Wilfred IV. Wilfred II came a close second, and Wilfred I and III were on a par.

— Are you sure you've counted well? Wilfred II asked.

— Yes, quite sure.

— Well, I guess I can't win every time.

— Excuse me, but what does the winner get for winning? I asked.

— Well... isn't winning enough? After all, if the winner got something and the losers didn't, it wouldn't be fair at all; and if the winner got the same prize as the losers did, then what difference would that make?

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— Well put, Wilfred I. And anyway, I'm happy enough to have won. It's not easy, you know, when you're playing against such skilled opponents.

— Why, thank you, Wilfred IV, very kind of you, Wilfred II almost blushed.

— Yes, indeed, very generous of you to share your victory with us like that, Wilfred I nodded.

— Well... we are family after all, Wilfred IV smiled, and off they went, flying into the night, still complimenting each other.

— Good night, everyone.





When I woke up the next morning, it was raining. Not exactly good weather for a picnic, so we stayed in the room. Tory ordered breakfast, and they drank their coffee on the balcony. When the rain stopped, we took a walk through the forest. We walked and walked for hours, and then stopped to sit on a fallen tree, and Tory placed me on the bark, next to her. What a nice feeling to look around and see fir trees everywhere and grass on the ground. How tall these trees are. The damp earth smells fresh and a cloud surrounds us. And we're not alone. Running up the path a noisy little boy rushes forth yelling:

– "A snail! A snail! War! Charge! I'll crush you!" And he keeps getting closer, just a few steps away from the snail. He's almost got his foot over it.

– "Wait!" Tory shouts.

– "What for?" the little boy frowns and lifts his pointy nose.

– "That snail you have your heart set on crushing doesn't just happen to be crossing the path. It's playing a game of hide-and-seek with his friends, and if you look in the grass you'll see them all."

– "I don't believe you", the boy stood firm.

– "Then come here and see for yourself. But watch your step. Careful." The grass was full of little snails, some climbing over fallen leaves, up bushes, up trees or rocks.

– "If you should crush him, his friends will never know what happened to him, and they'll go on and on looking for him, and winter will come, and they'll freeze to death."

– "Why would they look for him?"

– "Because they are his friends, and they care about him."

– "I don't have friends."

– "Sure you do, you just don't know it. If you were to get lost in the woods, would no one come to look for you?"

– "Roger would, for sure. Then he'd take me home to father, and I wouldn't get any money to buy candy for a week."

– "He'd come because he's your friend."

– "He's my brother."

– "The two often go together."

Looking at one of the snails' shells, Tory pointed and said:

– "See how that snail's shell resembles the one of the snail on the path? I'll bet they're brothers. And see how he's going every which way? I'm quite sure he's very worried about his little brother."





Suddenly the boy headed for the snail, and this time it seemed there was no stopping him. When he reached the snail, he stopped for a second, then bent down, took the snail by the shell and put it in the grass. And then he was on his noisy way again:

– “Roger, Roger, I’m here! Don’t tell father I ran off and I’ll share my candy with you.”

– Say, how did she know we were brothers?

– She knows all sorts of things. My name is Vic. What’s yours?

– I’m Rabbit Foot. Nice to meet you. She was only half right, though. We were playing tag, not hide-and-seek, that’s why I was going so fast.

– Be sure to thank her for us, the other snail said, for saving my brother. He’s always doing silly things. This morning he started talking to a dragonfly, and followed her everywhere, and ended up in a pond. Luckily Mr Bubbles, the old toad, took pity on him and helped him out, or else he would have drowned for sure.

– And what a lovely dragonfly she was, an elegant green body, pink wings, and the grace of a ballerina. This is Long Horn, my elder brother. He’s been taking care of me and my sister since our parents... were lost when the mountain creek changed its course.

– I’m sorry to hear that. Did you lose your house in that flood, too?

– Oh, no, we each carry our rooms with us all the time. This way we never have to worry about forgetting anything at home.

– And is your sister here, too?

– No... My brother doesn’t like to talk about it. You see, he’s still very upset. She married a slug.

– What’s that?

Rabbit Foot lifted his head, stretched out his neck and made his horns even longer:

– You don’t know what a slug is? Why, it’s a homeless snail.

– Enough about that. Come, I’m glad you’re safe, and perhaps this time you’ll learn your lesson at last.

Saying that Long Horn started moving away slowly.

– I’m so sorry he’s so upset, Rabbit Foot said. I miss Sky. My parents called her that because her shell had a bluish shade, and, when she was sitting on a leaf, from afar she looked like a piece of clear sky.

– Where is she now?

– Not far. She would so like to come stay with us, both her and her husband.

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- Have you met her husband?
- I have, but Long Horn won't even hear of it.
- Why not?
- Because... he's a slug.
- But if he had a shell, there would be no problem?
- Well, no, I guess not.
- So perhaps you should find him a shell.
- How?
- How big is he?
- Well, he's a little bigger than us. Hold on.

And off went Rabbit Foot.

He kept going and going, and it was a while before he came back, but, when he returned, he wasn't alone:

- Vic, meet Sky and Bareback.
- Hullo, I hear you thought of getting me a shell.
- Or something that looks like one at least. Let's see. How about a daisy?
- Daisies dry out... and I might be tempted to have a snack and eat it.
- How about a mushroom?
- Mushrooms can be poisonous. We really should think of something he can't eat. You see, he has quite an appetite, Sky said.
- A cone then?
- Marvellous idea, but how do we get it to stay on his back?
- We'll dip it in a little bit of resin. First you'll have to go rub your back against that root. There's a little resin there, and then Sky and Rabbit Foot will roll that small cone over your back.

It took a little time, but it was done.

– Hey, look at me. I've got a shell. And I can go this way, and I can go that way, and I can wiggle, and I still have it. It's literally stuck on me.

– I'll go get Long Horn, Rabbit Foot said and rushed off, so to say.

At first Long Horn couldn't believe his eyes:

- That's not a real shell, it's obvious.
- Does he not wear it as if it were one, though?
- But it isn't.

– But it could be if you wanted to see it like one. If he acts as if he's wearing a shell, it means he's not just a slug, he's a snail. And he has always been a snail in my eyes, Sky smiled. You don't understand that, because he doesn't have a shell to hide





into, he lives a much more dangerous life, he's braver than the rest of us. And he took the trouble of sticking a cone on his back to make me happy, which is more of an effort than you ever made to get to know him. Now why can't you agree to see it as a shell?

Long Horn didn't say anything. He got closer to Bareback and then mumbled:

—Nice to meet you. You should come have dinner with us tonight, we're having raspberry leaves. But do keep the cone on, we're having dinner at the Root Hollow, and an outfit is mandatory.

And, saying that, they all started to slowly make their way into the sunset. Half way off, Rabbit Foot turned and waved with his horns:

— Goodbye.





It started raining again in the evening, so we stayed in the room, Tory and her mother reading, listening to music, and I sitting on a table on the balcony. The sky cleared up by nightfall, and the new moon shone clearly. As the evening grew into the night, it got colder and colder, and Tory closed the balcony door and went to bed, leaving me there, on the table. My first night out alone, without my shell. How much louder the forest seems now, every crack, every twig falling, the wind gently rocking the fir trees.

—Hello! a happy voice yells out to my right, and I see a strangely shaped animal hanging upside down. I would never have seen him if it hadn't been for his eyes.

—Hello, Sir. Are you all right?

—Fine, fine. Perfectly fine, exquisitely fine, unimaginably fine, tremendously... well, you get the idea. But it is a truly wonderful night, splendid night. I tend to talk a lot, and I'm used to being interrupted, so if I bore you, don't hesitate to interrupt me. But don't cough. Say "excuse me" or "I understand" or just "be quiet", but don't cough. When somebody coughs, I get terribly afraid of catching a cold. I've had a terrible cold this spring. I coughed, and coughed... I couldn't even hang from a branch properly. Every time I clung to one, I coughed and broke it off. So don't cough... Unless of course you can't help it, then I understand. I know better than anyone what that feels like.

—I promise I'll try not to cough, even if I feel like coughing.

—Oh, thank you, that is so very sweet of you, very sympathetic, very considerate. Anyway, enough of that. My name is William Martin Thomas Christopher Anthony, but all my friends call me Squeaky. Nice to meet you.

—My name is Vic. You have a lot of names.

—Yes, you see, the night I was born there was a great storm, and many of us were knocked out of our nests. Since there was no way of telling to whom each of us belonged, the fathers whose babies were knocked over made an agreement they would each take one and raise them as their own no matter what, but all the babies would carry all the fathers' names, so every father could say that his son was carrying his name. So there are five of us who carry the same names. But in a different order, of course.

—Why do your friends call you Squeaky?

—Because every time they went out into the village in the evening to scare children, I "squeaked" on them, and they got into trouble.

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— Why did you tell on them?

— Because it's not fair to take advantage of someone's fears, no matter how much fun it is. And it *is* fun, I can tell you that, he giggled.

— You seem quite small, though. How could you scare them?

— Small, eigh? and suddenly he stretched out his wings and covered half the branch with them. Small, eigh? and he giggled some more. But what really gets them is when we smile at them. See?

And he lifted his upper lip showing a row of straight small sharp teeth, and four incredibly long canines.

— But wait, this is my good side.

Saying that he jumped off his branch and on the table, turned his head the other way and smiled again:

— My other tooth is chipped a little. I was out one evening, and I thought I'd try to bite a cow, taste some blood, see what it felt like; only I don't see very well when there is still light, and I picked a bull instead of a cow. And just as I was cleaning up a spot on his back I was planning to bite — you see, I care a lot about hygiene — first he slapped me silly with his tail, then threw me on his head. I was so dizzy I didn't realize I was sitting on one of his horns, so I went ahead and took a bite, and chipped one tooth. I've been meaning to have something done about it, but I'm so afraid of... of...

And he whispered something in my ear:

— The D word.

— The D word?

— Not so loud! Dentist.

— Oh... why?

— Have you never been to one?

— Not that I know of.

— How lucky of you. Dentists are these really bad creatures that like to drill holes in your teeth. They can also fix chipped teeth, though. And I do have a bad lisp ever since. And sometimes flies take advantage of that opening and get away before I can swallow them. It's embarrassing. Horribly, ghastly, unmistakably embarrassing. And I spit, too, but only when I get really angry and start talking very fast. But that doesn't bother me as much. If I'm that angry at someone, I don't mind spitting on them a little, too. I even have a good excuse: Sorry, chipped tooth — Phew — Sorry, and he giggled. What really bothers me is that I don't have many friends. I once had a good friend, a firefly. And then it rained one night, and I couldn't find any decent dinner, and I had always wondered what he would taste like. I'm very ashamed of it, though...

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Then he sat on the table next to me, and covered himself with his wings, and sighed, and sighed, and sighed.

— I'm sure he knows you didn't mean it.

— You think so? Squeaky cheered up.

— Yes, I do.

— Sitting like this feels nice. It's tiring to hang down all the time. If you don't pay attention for one second, if you don't keep your toes tight, BANG! you fall. Only now I'm seeing the forest upside down, completely opposite to the way I used to see it. This is fun, and he giggled again.

And then he turned serious:

— Do you have many friends?

— Not really.

— Friends you go flying at night with, or go scaring children with, or play Who-can-bump-into-a-tree-and-make-it-shake?

— None at all.

— Have you ever played that?

— No, I haven't. Is it fun?

— Oh, very, very. You have to fly as quick as you can straight into a tree, and if you're really strong, you shake it.

— But that must hurt.

— Not really. You're completely knocked out after hitting the tree, so you don't feel anything. Anyway, it doesn't matter... I have no one to play with, and it takes at least two to play: one must look at the tree and pick you up and take you home, and he sighed again.

— Why don't you have friends? Is it because you used to squeak on them?

— Yes, it is.

— But that was when you were young, you're all grown up now.

— Yeah, but they still go...

— And you still tell on them?

— I can't help myself, and he lifted his little shoulders.

— Perhaps if you stopped telling on them, they'd be your friends.

— You don't understand, I just can't help myself. It's not like I want to.

— I see... Then perhaps you could go tell somebody else, not their parents?

— Like who?

— How about that tree?

— Tell a fir-tree?

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– Yes, this way their parents wouldn't hear you.

– I'll try it, he smiled. This could really work. And then they'll like me, too. I may not be cute and cuddly, warm and funny, but I'd make a great friend. You know, they went out again tonight. But tonight I'm telling the tree, no one else.

And off he went to tell the tree, and he stayed there for a long, long time, and finally came back.

– There, I feel better now. Thank you!

Leaning over, he put his furless wings around me, and his cheek right over me... and I got a really close look at his sharp little teeth. And he was happy, his beady little eyes sparkled.

He sat up again, and yawning, he kept saying:

– They'll like me now, they will, they really will now.

And he fell on one side of the table, and started snoring:

– They will... Hrrrr... now they will...

A few minutes later, two more bats landed on the table:

– We'll take him home, poor chap. What is he saying there? Silly boy. I've got his legs, you take the shoulders. Good night, chestnut!

– Good night.

And, seeing them fly off into the night, I began feeling a little tired, too. I closed my eyes for a second and dozed off. It seemed as if I had been sleeping for hours when someone started calling out:

– Psst, Vic! Vic!

– Who's there?

A broad forehead with thick eyebrows and eyes wide open came forth out of the dark:

– It's me, Wilfred IV.

– Oh, hello. You startled me.

– I'm sorry to disturb you like this, but it is an emergency, otherwise I wouldn't have woken you up. You see, it's late, it's past midnight.

– Ah, and that's bad?

– Oh, just terrible, he said almost sobbing. The mouse didn't show up for the game tonight and he didn't call in sick or anything. It's true we heard him say he was quitting after the game, but he says that after every game. The thing is I have this really bad feeling in the pit of my stomach... It's also true I've had a little more to eat than I should have, but that's not it. I'm just afraid something may have happened to that





poor sweet little creature, Mr Whiskers. And me and my brothers would really be very grateful to you if you could come with us and help us find him.

— Oh, would you? would you? Please say you will, say you will, say you will, there was Wilfred II jumping up and down the branch.

— I definitely would, if only I could. But I don't have wings or legs, and I can only roll downhill. Rolling uphill is really tiring.

— That's no problem, I'll carry you in my claws, Wilfred IV said, standing on one leg, showing me his other one. I'll be very careful, I won't scratch you, I won't drop you. What do you say?

— In that case, I'd love to help you.

How exciting, flying so fast, from tree to tree, seeing the forest from high up, the moon, the mountains ahead. I breathe in the cold air. Free.

— Shouldn't we fly lower, though? Mr Whiskers is quite small in size. He might be hard to spot from up here. I'm afraid I've never looked for a mouse before, I don't even know where to look.

— "Mice in general prefer the forest floor. They like to build their nests underneath great roots or in holes in the ground" How primitive. "They live alone with their families and feed on forest fruit." There, now you know everything we know. Straight out of the pocket book edition of The Owls' Encyclopaedia.

— Thank you, Wilfred I.

— Quite welcome. Always a pleasure to share knowledge. Perhaps I should have become a teacher.

— You wouldn't have liked it: teachers have to wear glasses. It's part of their uniform, said Wilfred III.

— Quite true, that would have been a major setback.

— What do you do, Wilfred I?

— Well, I'm a member of the House of Owls, a member of the Parliament.

— Really?

— Yes. Why, last week we voted on a law to forbid migrating birds to fly over our forest. They make such a mess going this way and that. Awful. And then some of them always get lost, and we're stuck with them, having to look after them until spring, when their families return. There was one little problem, though.

— Yes, one very little one: there was no way of letting the migrating birds know about our law, so here they are again, flying South for the winter, right over our forest, Wilfred IV explained. Are you comfortable, Vic?

— Oh, yes, very. Thank you.

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And we flew and flew around the forest, all four owls in a row, and sometimes next to one the another, and still no sign of the mouse.

– Could Mr Whiskers have left the forest?

– Why would he, Vic? He had such a good life here. Sure, we hit a few branches with him, but it wasn't all that bad...

– There's a village nearby, isn't there?

– Yes, but we never go. Mummy told us not to.

– Never mind that, Wilfred II. This is a case that calls for extreme measures. Lead the way Vic – I mean Wilfred IV – and we shall all follow!

– But won't Mummy be upset? said Wilfred II worriedly.

– And who'll tell her? Wilfred I frowned at Wilfred II.

– Oh... not me.

– Certainly not you, because you're going, too, and if you told her, you'd get into trouble, too. Mr Whiskers needs us, and we shan't let him down. Right, Wilfred II?

– Right, right. Are you sure he needs us, though?

– Why, you ungrateful little monster. You should be a chicken, not an owl. Look at it this way: if you want to hang on to all your feathers, you're coming with us, whether he needs us or not. Go back and I'll pluck you skinny.

– Who's going back? Wilfred II shrugged.

And off we went to the village, leaving the forest behind, flying alone in the open night sky. The hills below us were empty, not a soul. The houses were all dark. We stopped on the roof of the church tower to rest for a minute, and just as the owl's feet touched the tiles, the bell rang once. The owls fluttered and flew every which way, scared by the sound of the bell, and in the middle of all that, Wilfred IV forgot he was carrying me and... dropped me. Down I went, rolling from tile to tile, then into the tower, and down the winding stairs and through a door that had been left ajar, right into the church, down the aisle. How beautiful the ceiling looked, so colourful. And the moonlight coming through the painted glass windows created such elegant shadows on the white walls. The whole room was lit up by candles burning in every corner.

– Oh, Wilfred IV, you've really done it now! Wait till I tell Mummy!

– I thought we had already cleared that out! I could hear Wilfred I grumbling. Are you feeling too hot tonight? Care to "shed" a few feathers?

– What I really meant was... Mummy would be very upset if she heard... but she won't... not from me... I mean...





– Enough already. Vic? Are you all right?

– Yes, I'm fine, Wilfred IV, I'm downstairs, in the church. Come through the tower, the door is open.

– We'll be right there, then.

– I'll stay and keep watch, Wilfred II said.

– Oh, will you?

Wilfred I pushed him with his beak into the tower, and down the stairs he came, and hit the door and opened it completely, with a big noise.

– Oooh... if that poor mouse felt the way I'm feeling now, no wonder he left...

– Stop complaining and start looking for Vic.

– I'm right here, at the altar.

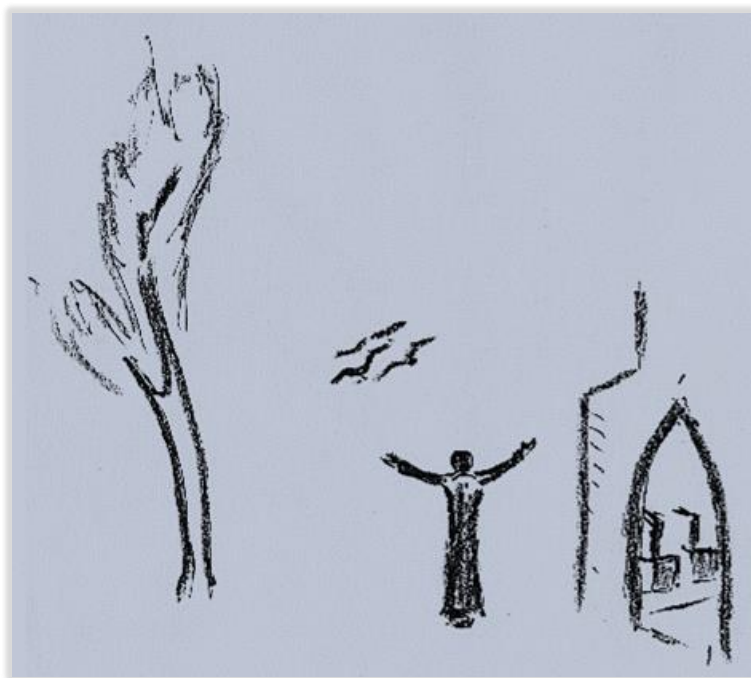
– Here you are, indeed. I'll carry you from now on, said Wilfred I as he picked me up, and just as we were getting ready to leave, the whole room was brightly lit, and a man stood at the entrance:

– *"Who's there? Who is it?"*

– We're in trouble now...

– Stop wallowing, Wilfred II. Everyone, to the door, let's fly out of here!

– *"Oh, my, oh, my, four owls in the church, four owls in the church... this must be a sign! I'll write to the Bishop first thing in the morning. No, I'll write him now. No, I'll phone him. But perhaps in the morning. A miracle! A miracle!"*



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- That was close. Is everyone all right?
- Yes, we're all fine.
- Well... what now, Vic?
- We'll have to search the streets.
- Let's go then. Only a few hours till daybreak.

And down we went, flying over houses and courtyards, over smoking chimneys... until, there was a:

- Meow!
- A cat! A cat! There!
- I see, I see, Wilfred III.
- No, you don't see! It's got Mr Whiskers!
- Why, you... you... ugly feline! Wilfred IV rushed forward, yelling at the cat.
- What? You really think I'm ugly? the cat turned to Wilfred IV, its eyebrows raised, its eyes almost pleading.

– Well... perhaps not really... I was just saying that to intimidate you, to make you leave our friend alone.

- Is Mr Whiskers your friend?
- And a very dear friend he is, and if you've touched even one frizzy little hair on his head, we'll...
- I'd never hurt him, not to worry.
- Then what are you keeping him here for?
- My masters caught him in the house and gave him to me, but the truth is I don't really know what to do with him.

- Why, play cricket, of course, Wilfred II went to the cat. What's your name?
- Well... they call me Fluffy, but I'm a Tomcat... Grrrowl! See? I'm a big cat!
- Oh, yes, we see. But Fluffy is a nice name, isn't it Vic?
- Oh, yes, very nice.
- I would have preferred Tiger, to match my personality... Grrrowl!
- So what do you plan to do with the mouse? Wilfred I interrupted.
- I don't know. I would have liked to keep him here, as a friend.
- That's very sweet of you, Fluffy, Mr Whiskers spoke, but my family is waiting for me. I can't stay here.
- Ooooh... Fluffy lowered his head, and his ears, and his whiskers. I see...
- But I will come to visit.





– You will? Promise?

– You will? the owls all asked in astonishment.

– Yes, I will. Every time I need to get cheese. You see, that's why the people in the house caught me. I came to get cheese. It's my son's birthday tomorrow, and I wanted to surprise him.

– In that case, I'll get you some cheese. Wait one second. I'll be right back, with a big piece of cheese, or my name isn't Fluffy... and I do wish it weren't...

And in just a few seconds he was back with the cheese:

– Here you are. And tell your son Happy Birthday from me.

– Oh, that's more cheese than I've ever seen. But how do I carry it?

– I'll carry it for you, Mr Whiskers, Wilfred III said.

– And I'll take you home if you like.

– Thank you, Wilfred IV, I certainly would.

– Goodbye, Mr Fluffy, we've got to get going now. It was very nice meeting you!

– Goodbye everyone, and please come pay me a visit. It gets so lonely here, just me and the chickens, and all they can talk about is the weather.

– We will, we will. Goodbye!

And back we went to the forest.

– Say, before going home, wouldn't you like to stop and have a cup of tea and raspberries?

– That sounds very nice, a wonderful idea, Mr Whiskers agreed.

We stopped in front of an old oak tree, the only one in the forest, and went into a hole, and there we were, in the tea room. Very nicely arranged, with seats covered in moss, and a carpet of leaves. They all had tea, and, since they didn't have a cup small enough for Mr Whiskers, they took the top of an acorn and used it as a cup.

– Are you sure you wouldn't like anything, Vic?

– Oh, no, I'm fine, thank you.

– Thank you everyone, for coming to look for me tonight. I'm really touched. You came all that way...

– You're very welcome, Mr Whiskers.

– Wouldn't you like to have a little cheese?

– Oh, no, we're fine, thank you.

– Well, perhaps a little, Wilfred II said and nibbled on a bit of cheese. This stuff is really good.



— Enough, Wilfred II, it's not for you, remember? We'll get you some on your birthday.

— Oh, no, please have some. There's more than enough here for everyone, said Mr Whiskers, pushing out the wheel of cheese.

— I've had quite enough, thank you. And Wilfred I is right, I'm just very curious, that's all. I've seen what it's like, and I'm fine. I've had far too many berries anyway.

— Mr Whiskers, we're all very glad you're fine. We thought perhaps you'd had enough of cricket, said Wilfred I.

— Oh, no, never. As a matter of fact, we'll have a game tomorrow, shan't we?

— No, not tomorrow. Tomorrow is your son's birthday, and you really should spend it with him.

— Well, then you're all invited!

— Really? Really? Oh, can we go? Can we go? Wilfred II was jumping up and down.

— Of course we'll go, said Wilfred IV.

— Oh, that's great. I've never been to a mouse party before. How exciting!

— Enough, Wilfred II. You know, tomorrow is already here, and we should get both of you home before morning. Mummy really hates it when we go to bed late.





I got back just in time to watch the sun rising. Seeing the red morning sky brings back such sweet memories, and it also reminds me I have a long journey ahead of me... I shall always be grateful to Tory for getting me this far. Without her I could have ended up beneath the wheels of a car somewhere, or I could have been kicked around from one little boy to another. But now it's time for us to part, time for me to begin my travel.

The hours passed swiftly. Another warm autumn evening.

—Are you ready, Vic? It's time, it's time! We're going to a party! We're going to a party!

—Oh, Wilfred II, will you never learn how to behave in public?

—What did I do now? What? What?

—Grow up!

—Oh, right, I had almost forgotten. I shall never be as old as *you*, of course. And why? Because you hatched first. That's it. Here we go again.

—Well, if you think hatching first is such a piece of cake, why didn't *you* hatch first?

—I was a baby then, I wasn't thinking.

—Not much has changed since.

—I won't let you ruin my good mood, I won't! Come on, Vic, we have a party to go to.

And Wilfred II picked me up, and off we went, flying twice around each tree, flying at times too high, at times too close to the ground.

—We're going to a party! We're going to a party!, Wilfred II kept singing.

—Where exactly is the party?

—To tell you the truth, I'm not quite sure, but we'll look for lights and listen carefully for laughter.

In a few minutes there it was: voices singing "Happy birthday to you, Happy Birthday, dear Chewey,"

So off we hurried, made a very abrupt landing, and joined everyone in singing the last "Happy Birthday to you," but the minute we landed they all fell silent, quite a few of them ran for cover, and we were the only ones singing.

—See what you've done? Now you've scared them, said Wilfred I while landing.

And, as the other two owls came down, all the mice ran and hid, until there were only Mr Whiskers and his son left.

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— Everyone, come out, I'd like you to meet my dear friends. Without them I wouldn't be here tonight, and needless to say, neither would the wheel of cheese.

On hearing that, they all started coming out one by one, some hiding behind those who were brave enough to go first. Slowly, the party picked up again, everyone was talking, laughing, nibbling on pieces of cheese. Mr Whiskers had arranged everything for tonight's party: he had hired fireflies to fly around, he had borrowed nutshells from his neighbour, the squirrel, for the guests to sit in, he had picked berries and prepared a huge pot of tea for the owls to enjoy.

— But, say, Mr Whiskers, where is Mrs. Whiskers?

— Oh, she ran off with a field mouse a long time ago. He promised her a life in the corn field, and they ended up in a place where they grew hemp instead. Chewey had barely been born. Anyway, she left her second husband for a rat. She said she couldn't stand country life any longer, wanted to live in the city. Chewey spent a summer with her a few years back. She lives in the basement of a building, has to climb pipes whenever she wants to go out, she does her grocery shopping in large trash cans... and they call that luxury. Oh, how time passes. Chewey is getting married, you know.

— Really? Congratulations.

— Yes, and they want to leave the forest, to go live in the village. What shall I do alone all day?

— Play cricket! Wilfred II laughed, while his brothers cast him an angry glance.

— Come now, Mr Whiskers, you're a young mouse, and there are plenty of things for you to do in the forest. Right, Vic? Tell him what you do during the day. We can't say that much, because we sleep during the day.

— Actually, I'm going to be leaving soon, too.

— What? No! When? they all asked.

— Tonight, perhaps.

— Why? No! Where?

— To the North. That's where I want to start my chestnut tree.

— Can't you stay a little longer?

— Autumn will be over soon, and I can't grow roots properly in winter.

— Oh, dear... Where exactly is the North? It doesn't say anything about it in my Encyclopaedia.

— It's a place far away, it's an endless fir-tree forest, really. The forest floor is covered with moss. Many elves live there, and they hide their treasures underneath the roots of trees.





—Oh, how delightful. So, if I were to live there, the way I live here, I could come across a treasure while I dug myself a home. Do you think they hide cheese, as well?

—I don't know, I suppose it all depends on what they consider to be valuable enough to be called a treasure.

—It sounds very nice. Is it *very* far away? I think I'd like to come, too. Not much left for me here.

—I don't know, really. I figure I'll ask for directions along the way.

—But how will you get there? We're owls, we can fly. But you? Wilfred IV asked.

—I don't know that, either.

—That's it. We're owls. We can fly. We'll go, too, we'll take them there, Wilfred II jumped up.

—My, my, I do believe he's finally beginning to think! He's right! We'll go! all four brothers agreed.

—It will be a very long way for you to carry us, though. I have an idea. Let's pay Fluffy a visit: I'm sure he has a ball of wool, and from it I'll weave a little sack me and Vic can sit in—one that can go around your necks. I'll even line it with cotton patches, and it will be soft and warm.

So we headed back for the village, in order to find Mr Fluffy, and we soon did. We landed on the roof of his house. He was sitting over a fireplace in which the fire was slowly burning.

—Psst, Mr Fluffy! It's me, Whiskers!

He jumped up:

—Where? Where?

—Up here.

In a few seconds, Fluffy jumped off the fireplace and, with a few acrobatic moves, he was on the roof next to us:

—You've come back!

—Mr Fluffy, I've come to ask a huge favour of you. You see, my friends and I have decided to set forth on a long journey: we're going to the North. But for that we need to make a pouch for the owls to carry us in.

The owls all nodded.

—And for that we need some wool.

—I have wool, Mr Fluffy said happily. I have a whole ball of it. I just have to roll it back into a ball. Where is the North?

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- It's in a forest, far far away.
- Can I come? Fluffy looked pleadingly.
- Well...
- Of course you can, I said, and everyone looked at me.
- Of course? the owls asked.
- Well, yes, of course. It does freeze all over in winter, and there are many elves there who like to chase cats, but you're not really a cat, you're a tiger.
- It freezes there? Do they at least have fireplaces?
- Oh, no, they're used to the cold over there. It's always very cold.
- Always? Mr Fluffy asked.
- Yes, and days are very very short there. It's dark most of the time.
- Dark and cold? In that case I'll think it over... But I'll get you the wool. Wait here: I'll return before you can blink, or my name isn't Fluffy... and I do so wish it weren't.
- Very clever, Vic, the owls smiled.
- Fluffy was soon back with a big bundle of wool:
- Here you go. I'm sorry it's a bit ruffled up, but I was exercising my tiger-ing skills on it this morning. And... you know... I've been thinking... I'm not really sure I want to come along. It's not that I don't like you... I'm just very fond of my fireplace. But do send postcards, will you?
- We will. Thank you Mr Fluffy.
- Fly safe! Goodbye! Try to keep warm!
- Bye!
- And off we went into the night.
- Well, Mr Whiskers, will you finish knitting by tomorrow night?
- I shall work all night, and it will be ready for sure.
- Good. Then Vic will keep you company, and tomorrow after sundown we'll leave.
- Say... Where are you going? a lisping voice came from above Mr Whiskers' residence.
- Squeaky?
- Yes, Vic. Hi!, and down he came to a lower branch, and continued to hang upside down. Where are you going?
- To the North.
- Oh... Where is it?
- It's far far away.





– Are you leaving secretly?

– Not really.

– Oh, good. You know how bad I am at keeping secrets. I would have felt very guilty if it were a secret. Why, just last night I was trying not to tell on the others, so I told the tree... But one of my friend's father was hanging from a branch, and he heard everything... So I squeaked again. I told you I can't help myself. Say, when are you leaving?

– Tomorrow night.

– Oh, dear, you really shouldn't have told me. You know what would be the surest way to know I won't tell? If I came with you, of course.

– Whom would you tell? Wilfred I asked.

– Is there anyone who you prefer did not know of your departure?

– Mummy, Wilfred II nodded gravely.

– Oh, dear, you really really shouldn't have told me that. I just can't help myself. I would never do it on purpose.

The owls all gathered and whispered, and after having talked it all over, Wilfred I spoke:

– We've discussed the matter and we've decided to vote on it, and if the majority of votes are in your favour, then you can join us.

– Oh, wonderful, exquisite, marvellous, superb...

– But first we must tell you what you're getting into: up there, in the North, it gets very very cold, it freezes, and—

– Oh, good, I can't stand the heat. You should see how cold it gets deep within the caves where I've lived.

– And the days there are very short, in fact most of the time it's night.

– That is indeed wonderful news. I don't like the day. I can't see very well in strong light.

– And there are many many elves who don't like cats.

– Well... That is a little narrow-minded of them to not like cats just because they are cats; but I'm glad there are so many, I'll make many many new friends.

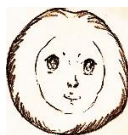
Wilfred I whispered in my ear:

– Perhaps we should have let *you* tell him. It doesn't seem to work as well when we do it. Oh, well, too late now.

– Let us vote. Who is against Squeaky's coming with us raise your hand, or wing, and for those of you who have neither hands or wings, just say "me".

No one raised their hands, and no "me" was heard, so it was decided:





– Welcome aboard, Squeaky chap. We're leaving tomorrow night. We'll all meet here, right after sunset. Now we should all go home and pack.

– One more thing, Squeaky said as he landed and walked forward, shyly, with his wings behind his back. If I go home tonight, I'll definitely, well... squeak. So, perhaps I could stay with one of you? Just to make sure I don't tell?

– Mr Whiskers, what do you say? Do you have room for one more?

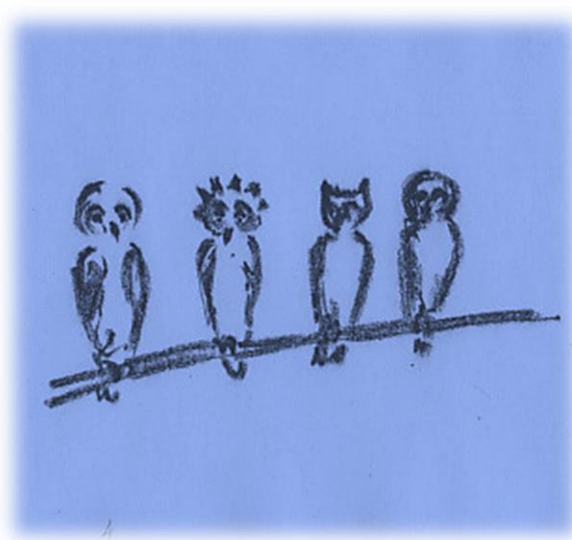
– Of course I do. Both room and cheese. Come on in, Squeaky. I feel we're very much alike, you and me.

And in we all went, underneath a root, through a long hole, right into a large hall. In the centre of it there was a square stone, used as a table, and smaller pebbles around it. Little shelves had been dug right into the walls. A small root hung down from the ceiling. Mr Whiskers got two pebbles, rubbed them together till they sparked: the root caught fire and lit the room. Carpets made of oak tree leaves covered the floor. On one of the walls there was a paw-print.

– That was my great great grandfather, Mr Whiskers explained.

Mr Whiskers made a bed of petals and little cotton balls for Squeaky, and lined a big nutshell with petals for me. Squeaky and I fell asleep right away, while Mr Whiskers started knitting our vehicle. After a very short while, though, Squeaky started snoring. Quite loudly. Then he also started shivering. Mr Whiskers got out a blanket and covered him, and Squeaky rolled tummy up, and he started talking in his sleep:

– They're going to the North, they're leaving tomorrow night. I just thought you should know. And I'm going with them, because they're my friends.





PART II

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Before I knew it, the night had passed. I woke up to the wonderful smell of coffee.

—Good morning, Vic. Squeaky and I are having a cup of coffee. I've been saving these coffee grains for years, and now I've decided it's high time I used them. I'll make a pot for us to take along, too. I received these coffee grains as a wedding present from an uncle of mine who had just returned from a trip to South America. He travelled on a boat across the ocean. I wonder what happened to him... Anyway, here is our sack. It has four compartments, side by side: two for us, two for luggage. I've covered the outside with oak leaves. No use leaving them here, they'll be good against the wind. I've sewn them well to the wool, which I also knit very tightly. The inside is lined with wool plucked right off a sheep. I've strengthened the part that goes around the owl's neck, but I've also made it very soft. It does feel good to be leaving.

—I've never had coffee before. It's really nice.

—Never?

—No. Not once. Never.

—Oh, my. Perhaps you shouldn't drink it all at once... Oh, dear, you already have.

I rolled out of my bed and went to join them, but suddenly Squeaky left the table, grabbed me and started singing and flying around:

—We're going to the North, we're going to the North.

Then, all of a sudden, he turned, and his wings got tangled somehow, as the room was far too small for him to go flying about, and down he came, flat on the floor, breaking the little shelves and scattering everything about.

—Squeaky, are you all right?

—Perfectly, exquisitely, wonderfully, all right. I've never felt so full of energy in the middle of the day.

—Oh, dear... I knew I shouldn't have let you have coffee... Vic? Where are you?

—Here... somewhere. Squeaky, could you please get up, if you don't mind?

—Oh, certainly, absolutely, positively, he lisped and jumped up.

Mr Whiskers rushed over with a piece of cloth:

—There you go. I'll wipe you clean, and you'll be back to your old shiny self again in no time. I'm sorry it's so dusty. Truth is that it was my wife who did the cleaning... and ever since she left... Well, I'm not terribly good at this sort of thing.

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– Oh, oh! I'll clean. I will. I'll do it.

– No, no, no, Squeaky! I mean, I could never allow a guest to clean my house. But there is something you could do for me, though. Could you please fly over to the third tree on the right from the fork in the paths, near the spring, and pick me an acorn?

– Certainly, gladly. I'm on my way.

– What do you need an acorn for, Mr Whiskers?

– An acorn always comes in handy. That's the first thing a squirrel will tell you. But I don't expect him to find one in a fir tree, Mr Whiskers giggled. Looking for it will wear him out a little, though, and at least we'll have a quiet afternoon.

Hardly had Mr Whiskers finished the sentence when in came Squeaky:

– Got it. What now?

– Wonderful, could you take it back now?

Squeaky paused for a second:

– Didn't you want it?

– I just needed to borrow it, but I'm giving it back now.

– I see. I'll be on my way then.

And off he went. But this time he took longer. Much longer.

– Now I'm a little worried. Perhaps we should go see if he's all right. It's not too far off. What do you say, Vic?

– Let's roll... literally!

So off we went, me rolling about and Mr Whiskers jumping ahead, stopping here and there.

– BOOO!

– Squeaky, honestly, you scared us. Come down from there.

– I'd love to.

– Then?

– I can't. I got tangled in the leaves.

When we looked closer, it became obvious that Squeaky was stuck in a raspberry bush.

– We can't wake the owls up, they need their strength for tonight. We can't wait until tonight, either, though. What shall we do...

– Vic! Watch out! He's armed! He has a cone! Shoo! Who are you?

– Hullo, the name is Bareback. At your service. How do you do, Vic?

– Hello, there. We seem to be in a predicament, I'm afraid. Our friend there has got himself stuck in the bush, and we can't find a way to get him down.





- Not down, up! Up, up, up! Squeaky giggled.
 - I have an idea. It's almost lunch time. Raspberry leaves, mmmmm... Sky!, Rabbit Foot!, he shouted.
 - Don't yell, dear, it's not polite. What is the matter?
 - Our friend needs our help, and they all got together and whispered and off they went to the base of the bush, then up the stems, to where Squeaky was stuck, and started eating away the leaves. It took a while, but Squeaky was free.
 - Thank you, thank you! I'm ever so grateful, Squeaky said, always flying about. I'm free, free as a bird, no... free as a bat!
 - Don't mind him, he's had coffee, Mr Whiskers explained. Thank you ever so much, and I'm very sorry for having yelled at you, Bareback.
 - Quite all right, glad to be of assistance. And such a delicious assistance, too. Squeaky flew over us once again:
 - We're going to the North, you know!
 - Really? Which way are you going? Sky asked.
 - Not very sure, really, I answered. Do you know a way?
 - Not quite, but I know that a few trees further down there lives a squirrel who used to babysit for a wild duck who came from there. You should ask her. Look for two fir trees growing together.
 - We'll go right now. Thank you! Goodbye!
 - Bye! Bareback called out while munching on a leaf.
 - Not with your mouth full, dear. Fare well, have a safe trip!
- We found the trees, just as Sky had described them. We knocked, but there was no answer.
- I'll go up and see if she's in, Squeaky whispered to us, then flew up the tree. Hello, Hello! I see you! Peek-a-boo!
 - Oh, dear... I really shouldn't have let him have coffee.
 - Hey! What are you throwing cones at me for? Squeaky called out. No, wait! No, not the big one! Ouch! Stop! My friends and I only want to ask you a question. Squeaky came back down, lisping and spitting:
 - Did you see that? Nasty, aggressive squirrel! and down came another cone. Enough already!
 - Excuse me, madam, we're very sorry for the interruption. My name is Vic. These are my friends, Mr Whiskers, and Squeaky – whom you've just met. We're disturbing you with a question. We're leaving for the North tonight...
 - The North? You don't say... the squirrel looked down from above.





— Yes, but we don't quite know which way to go.

— Well, I've never been there myself, but I might be able to help you. I'm a little old though. I hope I remember this correctly. Let's see... South, North, East, West... All right. You'll have to cross the mountains ahead. To be sure you're going in the right direction, follow the sun when it goes down. Once you've crossed the mountains, you'll come across a small creek, which is the source of a big river. Keep going, and you'll come across a second one. That is the one you must follow. I believe its name is Mureş. You must follow it until it reaches the Danube. Now, this is the tricky part: when you follow the Mureş, you fly in the same direction as its flow, but when you reach the Danube, you'll go in the opposite direction to the way it flows. The Danube comes from a faraway forest, The Black Forest. That's as far as I can remember. I used to babysit for a wild duck, you know. It shouldn't be very far from there. Will you remember it?

— Yes, thank you, I've got it all written down, Mr Whiskers said, showing a piece of bark on which he had scratched a little drawing.

— Well, have a good trip, and send me a postcard, will you? I have postcards from all over the world, from all the baby ducks I took care of, but none from the North. Send it to: Miss McNanny, The Twin Trees, Blackmoor Forest.

— Thank you, Miss McNanny! We certainly will. Goodbye.

By the time we got home Squeaky was worn out, so he slept the rest of the day in the quiet shade of the September afternoon.

— You know, Vic, it just struck me: I shall never see this place again... Sometimes I wish I could live forever: this way I'd never regret all the places I hadn't seen, for I'd have time enough to see all of them, to live everywhere. Only, knowing I could see it all, I may not have the same strong wish to see everything, as I have now; I'd take my time, I might never even travel at all, knowing I could start off whenever I wanted to. All in all, I'm happy with the way things have turned out. And you, you're just beginning your story, you'll grow into a chestnut tree. Like these big trees in the forest. Look at that fir-tree, do you see how it is leaning over the other one? It's so far bent that it could break. What is it doing?

— The bent fir-tree is telling the other one a secret. It has to get close, so no one hears it. Do you hear that? When the wind blew, the branches of the fir-tree made a violoncello-like sound. It's whispering.

— Oh... what is it saying?

— I can't tell you, it's a secret.

And the rest of the afternoon passed quietly, the wind blew slightly every now

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and then, the air was fresh. Soon the sun began to set.

—Here we are, all four of us! Ready to travel! And what a perfect night it is, a little wind, an almost clear sky. Now all we have to figure out is where we're going.

—Actually, Wilfred I, we almost already have, partly..., said Mr Whiskers, showing him the piece of bark he'd scratched the directions on.

—Perfect! And guess what we have: a map! A long time ago, a famous brave owl—whose name I don't quite remember—stole it from a man. It's been included in every edition of the Encyclopaedia ever since. It is a little old, but not much could have changed since. Forests don't just go about changing, do they? Let's see... it's from the year 500 AD. What year is it today? What difference does it make, mountains can't just move as they wish. So, we'll start off in Diocensis Thraciae, then go into Diocensis Daciae, where we'll meet Visigoths, then Pannonia, and it stops in the land of the Alamanni. Along the way we'll see all sorts of species of people: Goths, Huns, Vandals... Isn't it exciting? I never thought there were more kinds of people. But it makes sense, after all, not all birds are fortunate enough to be owls, either.

Hearing voices, Squeaky opened his eyes and yawned.

—Owls or bats, I meant, Wilfred I went on. But we should keep away from people. We'll always fly at night, and rest during the day. The sun has almost set, we should hurry. I'll carry you for the first part of the night, and we'll take turns. Is everyone ready?

—Ready, everyone answered.

Squeaky jumped up. Mr Whiskers and I got into our pouch, and up we went, waving goodbye to those who had come to wish us a safe trip.

The owls flew at a steady pace, and they kept going higher and higher, until we passed the clouds. There was very little sunlight up there, the clouds were crimson red, and the sky seemed still and deep. We couldn't see anything below, only the clouds we used to look up to from down below. Squeaky was sometimes going ahead, or staying behind, or just going round and round.

—How much further is it? Is it still far away?

—Oh, Squeaky chap, we shan't get there today. I expect we shan't get there for quite a long time. Are you tired?

—No, no... Not yet at least. How do you know we're going in the right direction?

—Look ahead: see those little tips? Those are the tops of very tall mountains. We'll have to cross those tonight, and, after we've crossed them, we'll go lower in order to find the creek we have to follow.

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—I see... so — when can we rest?
 —So you are a little tired, then?
 —No, no... perhaps — a little. Not that I'm complaining, but catching flies doesn't usually require a great deal of flying about, so I might be a little out of practice.
 —I'll tell you what: you can rest on my back. This way we won't have to go down again.

—Wonderful, thank you Wilfred IV!
 Squeaky jumped on Wilfred IV's back and laid belly up and feet crossed:
 —To tell you the truth, I thought I was going to fall down and crash. Thank you.

—You're welcome, Squeaky. Comfortable?
 —Oh, very, very. Say, what kind of bird flies up this high at night, has two bright white eyes and many little red lights along its wings, and is shiny all over?
 —Is it a riddle? Tell us! What is it?
 —I don't know, but it's coming this way, and very fast.

The owls all turned around to look.
 —Everyone fly in a row! This way, perhaps it won't notice us, Wilfred I said.
 The owls got into formation. The huge birds passed, making a horrible noise, and leaving behind a trail of white smoke. As it passed, we could see a man's head looking at us from inside:

—*"Oh, my, oh, my. Excuse me, Sir, did you see that? Did you? We just passed four owls. Why, just a few nights ago I found four owls at night in the church where I preach. And now again four owls: it's a miracle! it's a sign! I'll call the Bishop right away! Or maybe I'll wait until we land. Or perhaps I'll write it all down. No, I'll call... a miracle, I tell you, a miracle!"*

—Oh dear, what strange creatures roam the night sky... Wait till I tell mummy!
 —And how do you plan to do that, Wilfred II? Will you fly home or write her a letter?

—I... I... Do we still have a long way to go?
 We kept flying. It was dark already, but the moon shone brightly above the clouds and we could see the bare mountain tops. There were a few paths as well, going up the mountain, winding around short stout bushes. There were people everywhere.
 —Good evening travellers. What brings you so far up in the sky on a night like this?

We turned around, and there, flying by our side, an eagle, with his sharp beak a little bent and his knife-like claws tucked away.





– Hello, Sir. We're... going on a trip.

– Really? Where to? Pray tell.

He spoke calmly, in a coarse voice, a little rougher than a whisper. It sounded as if he was smiling all the time.

– Well... truly... right now... we're not so very sure ourselves where we're headed, Wilfred I answered in a trembling voice. But what brings you up here?

– Me? Why, I live here. I'm out a little late tonight, but who's there to mind? I have no friends, no family.

– No one?

– No... I have a few brothers, but they moved further down. I didn't want to leave the place where I grew up.

– Do they visit often?

– Oh... no... but who could blame them? Who would want to come to a deserted place like this, where not even a tree grows. I can't say I envy them, though. They've all been caught by men, and those men have put strange looking rings around their feet. Just imagine, a full grown eagle wearing a cheerfully coloured bracelet... It takes all your dignity away... Cruel people. By the way, my name is Shorty. How do you do?

– Allow us to introduce ourselves: Wilfred I, II, III, IV. That's Squeaky, snoring away on Wilfred IV's back, and... Wilfred I paused for a second. Say, what do you eat up here?

– Fish.

– Are you mocking us?

– No! Really, there are a few rivers further down, and fishing does so relax me.

– What else, what other foods do you like?

– I'm not very choosy, really. I go fishing once a week, fill up my pantry, and that's it. Why do you ask?

– Just curious, that's all. Then, if you're not looking for food, why are you flying about so late at night?

– Just making sure everything is in place. And I also spotted a group of hikers. I just love flying round and round them, and every once in a while I'll make a dive, and they all scream with admiration.

– But if you could eat anything at all, what would you like?

– Oh, I'd love a nice dish of mushrooms, perhaps a little soup as well, and cake... I love cake. I love sweets, but you can't find anything like this up here, alas.

– The reason I'm asking is because in my Encyclopaedia it says "Eagles are

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fierce predators, living high up in the mountains. They like to hunt down mice and little animals.”

— The first part is true. Fierce—yes... but I’m afraid you don’t have the latest edition. Eagles, at least in my family, haven’t eaten mice for decades.

— Oh, good. Then meet Mr Whiskers, and Vic.

— Hello, I hadn’t even noticed you, tucked away in there. So, where are you going?

— To the North.

— You don’t say... Where is that?

— We don’t really know yet. We have to find two springs. The second one is of the river Mureş, and that’s the one we must follow.

— I know the two springs. I go fishing there all the time. I’ll take you. But why are you travelling at night?

— We’re owls. And Squeaky is a bat. He’s usually awake at night, but he drank coffee today and didn’t sleep during the day much. You see, we’re all nightcreatures.

— I like the night, too. Could I be a nightcreature and join you? There really isn’t very much for me here... Even hikers don’t come as often as they used to.

— Let me tell you a little about the place where we’re headed. What would you like to know?

— Not much. I’d just like to go with you, if you don’t mind.

— No, not at all. Right, everyone?

We all nodded.

— But would you mind terribly if we stopped for a second in my nest? I’d like to pick up something.

— Is it far?

— Just down below. Come on, you’re all invited.

And down we went. The nest was perched over a tall rock, very neatly kept, and with a beautiful view of the valley and all the peaks around it.

— Where is it, where could it be... Ah, here it is, Shorty said holding up a piece of eggshell.

— So you’re nostalgic about hatching, too, Wilfred IV said.

— Pardon me, but what is that?

— Wilfred II, how impolite, how nosey! Mind your own business! Now, if Shorty wants to tell us, I’m sure he will. Right, Shorty? You wouldn’t happen to wish to tell us why you’d like to take along a piece of an eggshell, would you? Wilfred I asked.





— It's not just any egg shell, you see. It's a piece of her shell. Sharpsey's... She had the sweetest eyes. Her family used to live on that rock, just across the valley. Every morning we'd flap wings at each other. And then her parents decided to move. She had just learned how to fly, and she flew over and gave me this, so I'd always remember her. I'd really like to take this along, but I'm afraid of losing it.

— Here, put it in the pouch, we'll take care of it, won't we, Vic?

— Yes, we'll guard it and keep it safe.

— Thank you... Shorty's voice softened until it could hardly be heard.

And off we went again, up, up, over the clouds. All this time, Squeaky had been sound asleep, with his little round tummy facing upwards. But now he was yawning and stretching, and then he opened his eyes and saw Shorty flying beside him.

— Hello, Shorty smiled.

— Aaaaaaah! Help! Help!

Squeaky jumped off Wilfred IV's back and flew around him, hiding under him.

— Everybody stay calm, I'll fight, I'll defend you, Squeaky spoke while hiding in Wilfred IV's feathers.

— Come out, Squeaky, this is our friend, Shorty. He's coming with us to the North.

Squeaky's head jumped up while his wings were flapping away:

— You're not hungry, then?

Shorty smiled:

— Not to worry, little one, you're safe with me. And Squeaky soon went back to sleep.

— Pardon me, but what does your name come from? Wilfred III asked.

— My parents called me Attila Sharp Beak when I hatched. But after that, whenever they returned with food, my brothers would jump up and peck at me, and I was the last one to eat. And then, when they stopped pecking at me, I let them eat first anyway, if they wanted it that badly, I didn't want to go before them and upset them. I don't like seeing anyone upset. So my parents thought I must have really short legs, and they called me Shorty.

— Well, we'll call you Attila. We know you're not short at all, Squeaky said half asleep.

— Thank you, I've always dreamed of being called that. I remember hearing my mother before I hatched telling stories about a great man called Attila.

— You're named after a man?

— Not really. You see, he had a pet, an eagle. That eagle was one of my





forefathers, and his name was Attila, too. The stories he told have been passed down from generation to generation. He used to talk about that man, too. Attila, the man, was a king. He ruled over fierce warriors called the Huns. They would ride horses without using a saddle, and they would hunt and put the meat under a cloth, over the horse's back and underneath them. That's how they ate it. First they rode over it, then they ate it. Attila, the eagle, never had to hunt. He was always fed. I suppose that's why we've lost that skill. The king took Attila to many places. He talked of The Great Wall of China, and the Roman empire, and the Franks, and the Visigoths.

– Why, they're all here on my map. Look!

– Yes, I see. Knowing all I know, perhaps I'll be of some help after all. I hear those Visigoths can be quite mean people. Look there! Down there, that's where the Mureş starts. Now I say we start following it until we find a good place to rest, and we can leave again tomorrow evening, considering we are nightcreatures. It's almost morning now.

We started flying lower, not too far from the ground, following the little creek as it got bigger and bigger. No place seemed fit to stay in, the earth was damp, so we kept looking. And then we found the perfect place: three fir-trees growing together, with large branches and plenty of holes for all of us. We stopped at what seemed to be the main entrance, and Wilfred I went in:

– Hello, anybody here? Hello?

– Ssssss... not so loud.. sssss.

– Oh, pardon me, Wilfred I backed out, and with him out came a snake.

– What on earth, or in the air, are you doing at this late hour. It's so late, it's almost early. Early in the morning.

– We're travellers, madam. Sorry to have disturbed your sleep, Attila politely replied.

– Whoever said I was sleeping? I always get up this early: it's a big place, and there are many things to be done. And then there are my grandchildren to look after... I'm a busy snake.

– Oh, that kind of snake? I was trying to find you in my Encyclopaedia, but I could only find Cobras, Vipers, Boas. So, you are a Busy snake.

The snake smiled:

– I'm a garden snake. See? I'm green.

– I've never met a garden snake in the forest.

– We don't normally live there. And I probably shouldn't be telling you this, but we're not venomous either. But keep that to yourselves. All our neighbours think

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we're dangerous tropical snakes brought here by man.

— Your secret is safe with us. How did you get here?

— The truth is I got fed up with living in the city, among humans. On the one hand they practically invite us to pay them a visit by putting rocks and logs, and building fountains in their gardens, and on the other, when we actually show up, they scream their heads off and chase us away with brooms. It was the screaming that got to me. The minute I went out, I only heard an "Aaaaaaah!" here, a "Heeelp!" there, I had to go see a therapist, that's how stressed I was, and he recommended that I move. So here I am. My husband stayed behind, though, and I haven't talked to him in a long time. But there is no way of getting through. He won't even have a doorbell put in, because he's terrified of the noise it makes, so not even letters can be delivered to him.

— Where does he live?

— In the city, quite close to here. There is a church in the centre, and he lives in the garden. He's so terrified of everything that he doesn't leave the house much. When they're not shouting, they're ringing the church bells.

— That is terrifying, indeed, we heard those, too, Wilfred II agreed.

— We're headed that way tomorrow: it's right here, on my map, on the course of the Mureş. The name of the city is Novum Forum Siculorum, isn't it?

— I really don't know, but it is on the course of the river. When will you be leaving?

— Tomorrow night, just after sundown. We're nightcreatures, you see. If you like, we can take your husband a message, Attila offered.

— I would be ever so grateful. I would like to tell him where to come, I forgot to give him my address in my last letter, and soon we'll be going to sleep for the winter, and I should prefer him to be here.

— Then write him a letter and we'll deliver it.

— Where will you be spending the day?

— We don't know, really. All we want to do is rest.

— How many are you? 1, 2, 4, 5?

— 8. There on Wilfred IV's back is Squeaky sleeping, and here are my friends Vic and Mr Whiskers.

— I see. It will be a little cramped, but I would be very happy to offer you shelter for the day. I'll even fix you breakfast if you tell me what you like.

— Raspberries, cheese, fish... everyone answered at once. But whatever you have will be fine.

— Did I hear breakfast? Squeaky jumped up. Ooooh, he stretched, I'm so





hungry. I'd love some buzzing flies.

—Well, that's exactly what I'm making for my grandsons for breakfast. Go down, second hole in the tree on the left and sit down at the table, I'll be right there. Now I'll see you to your rooms, and I shall have everything you asked for by the time you get up.





We all went to bed, exhausted from our trip over unknown lands, while Squeaky filled his little tummy to his heart's content. When he'd had enough, he joined us and fell asleep. We all noticed it, for he started snoring louder than ever.

— Say, Squeaky chap, you're a bat. Don't bats normally hang from branches? Wilfred III asked.

— Well... yes...

— Then, shouldn't you do that?

— You're quite right.

Squeaky went out, found a nice, dark, branch for himself, wrapped his toes around it, and soon he was snoring again, so we all went back to sleep. But, before long, we were woken up by the sound of a crash. Mr Whiskers rushed out to see what had happened, and returned with the news:

— Squeaky fell.

— Now look what you've done Wilfred III. Squeaky! Come on in here, we've made room for you, Wilfred IV called out.

— I'm afraid I'm not so good at the whole bat thing. And now my back hurts.

— That's all right, Squeaky boy. Come here and get some sleep, I'll carry you tonight. Only try to sleep on your side, don't sleep belly up.

— If I snore, just wake me up. Thank you Wilfred IV, and Squeaky fell asleep all tucked in under Wilfred IV's wing. Soon everyone was sleeping again, and Squeaky snoring away.

— He did say to wake him, Wilfred II whispered.

— But he didn't really mean it. And just look at his sharp little nose, and the way his whiskers tremble every time he snores.

— Yeah... I can *hear* it, too...

Before we knew it, the day was over and it was almost dark again.

— Breakfassssst everyone!

We all got up and went down for breakfast in a room with no chairs, no carpets, just a huge table in the middle. On the table there were raspberries, blueberries, mushrooms, cheese.

— I'm sorry, but the only fish I have is smoked. I got it when I was living in the city. I hope you like it.

— Delicious, said Attila and gulped it all down.

When everyone had finished their meal, we were ready to go.

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– Have you written the letter for your husband?

– Yes, here it is. Thank you so much for taking it. He lives right next to the entrance to the church, underneath a huge stone, next to a rose bush.

– We'll find it. Whom are we looking for?

– His name is Cessil. Have a safe flight!

Up in the air again, over the forest, following the creek that is slowly growing into a river. The moon is shining brightly over the hills and mountains. Up ahead we begin to see the lights of the big city.

– It seems bigger than on my map. We must all stick together, Wilfred I said.

– I'll go first, said Attila, I fly faster. If I see danger ahead, I'll come to warn you.

Squeaky was sleeping quietly on Wilfred IV's back.

– How come he isn't snoring now? Wilfred III asked.

– Just watch the way you're flying, Wilfred III.

We're now flying over the city. Cars are passing down streets. Huge houses everywhere. When the church towers spring up sharply ahead of us, we begin our descent.

– All right, everyone, it's safe to land, Attila flew back to tell us.

One by one we landed in the church yard.

– Hello, is anyone here? Cessil?

– Allow me, I said, and rolled out of the pouch, down through the grass, to the rose bush. Good evening.

– Good evening to you, too. Who are you?

– My name is Vic, and I'm a chestnut.

– Oh, how lovely, I've never met a chestnut before.

– Nor I a rose bush. What is your name?

– I don't really have one. I used to have a few friends, daisies, and they used to call me Mystery, because I hide so many secrets in my branches, and no one dares look for them, because of my thorns. But I don't know why they haven't grown again this year.

– What secrets do you hide?

– Well... I like to snatch things from people who come near me. Little things. To remember them by. The one I'm proudest of is near my roots. I was brought here a long time ago, before this church was built. A man planted me for his lover to see me and remember him. When he was planting me, I tore away a little patch from his blouse. I still have it. Much later, a knight came to admire me. As he tried to hold one





of my flowers in his hand, he touched a thorn with his finger, and a drop of blood fell on a petal. Soon afterwards, a lady came accompanied by an old woman: *"This is the magic bush that will help you find your love. Whisper the magic words over one of its flowers,"* the old woman said to the young one. And the young lady whispered as she picked the flower with the drop of blood: *"May this rose help me find him who may be so bold as to shed his own blood for me."* I wonder what became of the two... But enough of my secrets. Tell me some of yours.

— I don't have any yet. But once I've grown my chestnut tree and start having them, I promise I shall tell you.

— What brings you here tonight?

— We're looking for a resident of this garden, a snake, Cessil. Perhaps you know him?

— Oh, yes... He lives right under that rock, but he's such a frightened little thing. Why, if he could cast a shadow, I think he would be frightened of it, too. What do you want with him?

— We have a message for him, from his wife.

— Good luck in getting it to him. I doubt he'll answer the door. You'll have to go in and talk to him.

— It's been wonderful meeting you, Mystery.

— You, too Vic. And don't forget your promise, for if you break your word even once, you'll never keep it afterwards.

— I shan't. Goodbye.

— Well, Vic? What did the rose bush say?

— That we'll have to go in under the rock to talk to him.

— I'll go, Mr Whiskers volunteered. I'm small enough to fit through the hole.

And off he went, and he was gone for quite a while. We all began hoping Cessil had had a good lunch... Then he came back out again:

— He's in really bad shape. We can't leave him like this, and he can't get out of the city on his own, either.

— I'll fly him to his wife. I'm fast, I can take him and be back in no time at all, Attila offered.

— Come on out, Cessil, my friend will fly you home.

— Oooh, thank you. No humans, right? No one around?

— No, no, come on out.

— Have you looked behind the bush? They could be hiding there. They like to hide there. And jump out. And ssscream, and ssstamp their feet. Have you looked?

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– We’ve looked, there is no one there, just us.
 – Could you look again, they could have sssneaked in behind your back, when you weren’t looking. They like to sssneak in on sssnakes... and ssscream, and sstump their feet.

– No one, it’s a human-free garden.

And a skinny snake crawled out of the hole shivering and trembling. He shook so hard his voice trembled:

– And there are no humans where we’re going, right?

– None at all.

– Oh... good. I never want to see another human again... or hear them either.

Let’s go, please, let’s hurry!

Off they went into the night, and we waited for Attila to return. All of a sudden, the church door opened and we could see two silhouettes standing in the doorway:

– *“Thank you for agreeing to see me at such a late hour. I wouldn’t have bothered you, but extraordinary things have happened, Father. Just a few nights ago I found four owls in my church, and then, last night, I was on the plane flying here, and I looked out of the window, and there they were again, four owls. It’s a sign, Father, it’s a sign.”*

– *“I see... One second. I’ll get some paper and a pen to write it all down.”*

One of the two men walked back into the church.

– Hey, over here! Attila called from over the church. Come on, up, up, away we go!

I hopped back in the pouch next to Mr Whiskers, and off we went. When we took off, we passed close to the man still standing in the church doorway. He turned around and started shouting:

– *“Father, quickly, hurry! Hurry! Come out! Here they are again, all four owls, one after the other! It’s a sign! It’s a miracle!”*

The other man came out, but we made it over the roof just in time.

– *“Ohh... if only you had hurried... they flew right in front of me.”*

– *“I see... Well, why don’t you get a good night’s sleep, and we’ll talk about all this tomorrow morning?”*

– *“You should have seen them, Father, all four of them.”*

– *“Come along now, we have a nice comfy bed in the room behind the church. You’ll tell me all about it in the morning.”*

– We really shouldn’t let people see us like that, Attila spoke in a grave voice.

– Yes, you saw poor Cessil..., Squeaky lisped.

– They don’t really notice us, anyway. They’re not exactly the brightest





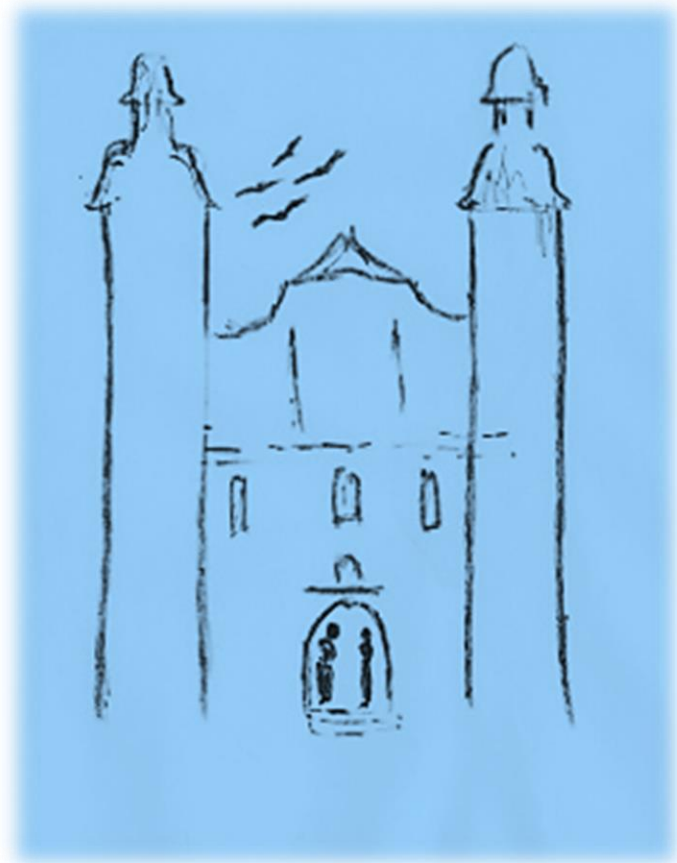
creatures, Wilfred II spoke.

—Someone who ignores you can be even more dangerous than someone who comes right after you. I agree with Attila. We should keep our distance. Let's see now: the next city on my map is Apulum. There is a note here: "the home of the Dacians, important military settlement." By my calculations, it shouldn't be more than three hours away. And we shall have to be very careful there, soldiers might mistake us for the enemy and attack us. From what I can tell, there are no mountains to cross, only hills. Perhaps we can fly even further if we're not too tired. There is a smaller city further up a mountain, but it doesn't have a name.

—I think we should just fly and see, Attila said. Squeaky, how is your back?

—Ohhh... not so well...

—Why don't you fly on my back for a while then, when Wilfred IV gets tired. Now, we should be flying closer to the river from here, and a bit lower, so we don't lose our way.



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As we went down and closer to the river, we crossed a huge, busy street where cars with their lights on were going in all directions. The city seemed peaceful seen from up high, over the rooftops. How peaceful all cities would be if they were made up of rooftops only! People make far too much noise. Now we've left the busy city with its lights behind, and are heading out into the night. The river keeps us company, humming its constant melody.

– Come on, won't anybody say something? Will no one speak? It's awfully silent, Wilfred III complained.

But no one spoke, the night had brought a strange silence.

– Attila, tell me more about your childhood. What games did you play?

– My brothers liked to play Who-can-dive-the-lowest. You have to fly high up in the sky and then, really fast, go down as close as you can to the ground, without actually touching it, then fly back up again.

– Didn't you play?

– Not much. I liked to just spread my wings and float wherever the wind took me. The last time I played with them, I touched the ground. Until then, I had never touched the ground. I would raise the earth without having one feather touch it, then fly back up before you could wink an eye. One day they came to ask me to play, and they wouldn't take no for an answer, so I went along. I was flying very fast over the mountain peaks, then I descended almost vertically. I could see the ground getting closer and closer. A little rock I couldn't see from very high up was getting bigger and bigger, and, just as I was about to start flying back up again, my brothers screamed: "Look at Sharpsey!", so I looked, and forgot to climb, and I made a very abrupt landing, I tumbled a few times. But nothing mattered. I got up and started looking around, I flew around, and then I asked them where she had gone. They laughed and flew away. I still can't help wondering if she really came back for me. So I haven't played ever since, lest I should miss her arrival if she came back again.

– But... what if she didn't come back, what if she wasn't there at all? Suppose your brothers just made it up..., Wilfred III said.

– Why would anyone say something that isn't true? I understand that sometimes you may choose not to tell the truth if it really hurts somebody's feelings, but I don't think they would have made it up. Why would they?

Attila's sharp eyes never looked more sincere and puzzled.

– Perhaps they saw someone who looked like her, Attila continued.

And there was silence again. We got very close to the water. So close we could





hear mosquitoes buzzing.

– Mosquitoes! Yummy!

Squeaky dashed off Wilfred IV's back, flew right over the water with his mouth wide open, collecting all the insects in his way until his cheeks were full.

– Now, why did he have to do that? Oh, it's a good thing I've already eaten, Wilfred II spoke and looked away.

– Feeling better Squeaky? No more back pain? I'm glad for you! Wilfred IV frowned. Maybe now you can carry *me* for a change.

– Aaah... well... my back still bothers me a little...

Wilfred IV frowned even harder at Squeaky.

– But I'll be fine, I'll fly from now on. Thank you for carrying me, Wilfred IV, Squeaky said flying closer to Wilfred IV and giving him a big silly smile with his beady eyes wide open and showing the dimples in his cheeks.

– You're welcome. Now move along.

Underneath his frowning eyebrows and grumpy voice, Wilfred IV was smiling:

– Silly bat.

It's been at least three hours since we left the city, and nothing.

– We've been flying too slowly, that's what it is, Wilfred I said.

– I'm sorry, Squeaky let his little head drop.

– Not to worry Squeaky fellow, hop on and we'll go faster, Attila said.

– All right!

Squeaky jumped on with enthusiasm. Soon we could see from afar the lights of the city.

– That must be it. Now remember, it's a military city, we shouldn't be seen.

We flew silently from one roof to another, one by one, not to arouse suspicion. All of a sudden, the sky was covered with clouds.

– It will rain soon, we should look for shelter, said Wilfred IV.

– Look there, a wolf and her babies, in the middle of the street! cried Wilfred II.

– No, it's just a statue. But we shouldn't get too close to the ground. If these people built a statue in honour of a wolf, there might be many of them roaming down the streets, said Wilfred I.

– Over there, that's a tower. We'll take shelter there, in the church, said Attila.

We had arrived at the tower just in time. It began to pour, it rained and rained. When the rain let down a bit we heard two voices coming from down below:

– *"Tell me, what brings you to me on such a night, and in such weather?"*





– “I went to the priest in Târgu Mureş first, but he didn’t believe me, so now I’m coming to you, Bishop of Alba Iulia.”

– “What is the matter?”

– “Nothing bad, quite the contrary. A few nights ago I found four owls in my church, and then, the night before last, I was on the plane over to Târgu Mureş, and from the plane I saw them again, all four of them. It must be a sign.”

– “You don’t say! And the priest in Târgu Mureş wouldn’t believe you... I can’t imagine why.”

– “I think they’re trying to show us something. Last night I saw them again. The priest in Târgu Mureş just missed them.”

– “Aha... I see... and you’re planning on following them, to find out what it is? Before you do that, I have a huge favour to ask of you: it’s almost midnight, would you go up to the tower and ring the bells? The machine is broken again, so you’ll have to go all the way up. I’d do it myself, but I’m getting quite old, I’m not as strong as I was when I was young.”

We heard footsteps up the stairs.

– The rain has stopped, everyone get ready to go. Someone’s coming, Attila spoke, and flew off first with Squeaky on his back.

Just as the door opened, we all left, one by one.

– “Bishop! Bishop! Look! Do you see them? They’re here, the four owls! Look, there they fly! It’s a sign, a miracle! Did you see them?”

– “See who?”

– “The owls, all four of them! They just flew away.”

– “Oh, the owls, of course, the owls. Goodbye, owls! Bye, bye! Bye owls! Now, the bells please, 12 times for midnight.”





Out of the city again, we seem to be heading upwards. We can barely see the moon through the clouds.

– The next city shouldn't be too far, and we still have quite a few hours till daybreak.

– But we won't be able to find shelter in the city. Shouldn't we look for a place to spend the night before we reach the city?

– On the map there seems to be a wall going all around the city. From what I've seen so far, people have abandoned these walls, so we can probably rest among the ruins.

– Whatever you say, Wilfred I. And if the sun rises, I can always lead you to safety, Attila said.

The land wasn't as flat as it had been up to here, it kept going up and down, we flew over hills and valleys, always following the river. We passed forests of fir trees, but also many other trees. And then, after climbing a hill, the city was right there, stretching out in front of us.

– It's a little bigger than it looks on your map, said Wilfred III. Perhaps you should make a note of it. Perhaps you should note down everything you see, so that when we reach the North you can send it over to those who print the Encyclopaedia, and they can publish it in the next edition, and say the map was updated by you. Wouldn't it be nice to see your name in print?

– You're perfectly right. But we should find out the name of the city. It probably didn't have one when the map was drawn, but perhaps someone with a little imagination has passed through here since then and named it.

– Hold on, look there, over the hill there is a herd of sheep. I'll go ask them, and Wilfred III flew down and landed on a wooden fence, next to what seemed to be a sheep: Excuse me, Madam, are you a sheep?

– Well... now I know for sure I need to change my job, a coarse voice answered. I'm not a sheep, I'm a sheep dog, and I'm no Madam, either. Call me McBark.

– Sorry, Sir, Mr McBark. My name is Wilfred Ernest Chester III, glad to meet you. I was just wondering, do you know the name of the city over there?

– I'm new here, no, I don't, but I'll go get the ram, Mr McMutton. He's been here a long time.

And off he went. When he came back he was bringing the ram with him.

– Bah, bah! All this barking and chasing. Is it my fault you have to stay awake at night? What is the meaning of this? Who are you to wake me up in the middle of





the night? Don't you know that my horns need their sleep?

— I'm sorry, Sir, I'm Wilfred Ernest Chester III, and I'm trying to find out the name of that city over there.

— What for?

— My brother is working on a map to be printed in the Owls' Encyclopaedia, and he needs to write it down.

— Really? Bah, he said with amazement.

— Yes, and if you tell us, then we shall mention you in the credit section: "With special thanks to Mr McMutton."

— Oh, that sounds wonderful. And you'll send me a copy of it when it's out?

— Of course.

— Very well! The city's name is Deva, with an "a" at the end, and my name is with a double "t".

— Thank you, Sir. Where shall we send you the book?

— Depends. If it comes out in summer, I'll be at the enclosure up in the mountains. That's where I go for the holidays. But in autumn I come here. Just write my name on the package, they'll know where to find me. Got to sleep now, good night!

— Good night! and Wilfred III came back: Deva. Am I good or am I good? he grinned.

— All right, you're not so bad. Now let's get going.





The city was all built in the plains, but in the middle there was a hill, and on top of that hill there were walls, going all around, all lit up.

– That’s where we’ll spend the day. We should be safe there.

We flew clear across the city, getting a little far from the river, all the way up the hill, and landed in the middle of the fortress.

– Who’s there? This is private property! someone called out from the bushes.

– We mean no harm, we’re just looking for a place to rest, Wilfred I answered.

– Then you’ve come to the right place! and out rolled a fat little squirrel with a bushy tail. Welcome to Madam Munchalot’s Inn, come in, come in. I mean up the tree, up the tree. Oh... one second. You don’t know the fee.

– There’s a fee?

– Yes: you must tell a story.

– Oh, all right, we’ll tell a story, then.

And up the old oak tree we all went, into a huge hole, full of birds, squirrels, mice.

– Shhh, now listen: the parrot is telling his story.

A brightly coloured bird with spikes on its head walked to the middle of the room, and in a very nasal voice started speaking:

– I was born in a country far, far away, in the jungle. When I was just a baby, they brought me over here and sold me. The first family who owned me kept me in a small cage with iron bars. Every once in a while they left the door open, and got very mad when I left my cage, but I had to stretch my wings. They soon gave me away. My second family had a little boy who, whenever the parents weren’t looking, stuck his finger through the bars, pointing at me. I tried to tell him that wasn’t a very nice thing to do, pointing at someone just because they’re different. He didn’t listen, so whenever he stuck his finger, I pinched it. Then came my third family. They kept me in a nice green house full of luxurious plants and let me fly freely. But the lady of the house didn’t have much of a vocabulary. Whenever I flew over to her to have a decent conversation, all she could say was: “Say Hello! Hello!” One day I just decided I’d had enough. After all, I had heard everything she had to say. So I put an orange peel in the door when they came to feed me, and when they went back out, the door stayed ajar, and I made my escape. The city in which I used to live was by the sea, and my first friend was a seagull. He helped me, smuggled me aboard a ship that was going to my homeland. After a long journey, I got home again. I remembered the place where I had been born, my family, and I set off to find them, and I did. I found them, they

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lived in a palm tree on the beach. They were happy to see me, and very welcoming. The minute they saw me they all went: "Have a banana! Some coconut? Banana, coconut, banana, coconut..." Banana coconut one day, banana coconut the next day, every day banana-coconut... How much can a parrot take? I decided to go outside, fly around a bit, and out of nowhere came this huge bird. When it spread its wings, it practically got dark outside. I flew, and I flew fast, and got away. I stopped on a water lily on a lake, to rest. It was so peaceful: there was a waterfall ahead, flowers to my left, and then I looked to my right and there was a huge open mouth lined with large teeth—a crocodile. I managed to get away just in time, before he snapped his jaws. From there I flew straight into port and got on the first ship, and here I am. I just can't help it, I'm a city bird. And I'm a permanent resident of this inn.

Everyone flapped their wings and clapped their hands.

—Let's listen to little McPeck, the duckling now.

A little wild duckling straddled to the middle of the room.

—Hello everyone. My story is very short. I hatched a few weeks ago, and, as soon as I learnt how to fly, I left with my parents and the rest of our friends for a warmer land. A week ago, as we were passing over a forest, I saw men with dogs down below. Everyone started flying, and suddenly there was a loud noise, and I looked around, I couldn't see daddy any more. So I went to ask mummy where he had gone. She said he hadn't gone anywhere, he was right there with us, we just couldn't see him any more. Yesterday, we were flying over this city, I dozed off a little, and a gush of wind brought me over here. Now, I hope mummy comes to look for me, I hope she doesn't think I've turned invisible, too...

—Do you know where you were headed?

—All I know is that we were supposed to meet up with my cousins on the Danube.

—Ah, then you're in luck, little duckling, because we're headed just that way. We'll take you to your mother, Attila said.

—You will? the little duckling was quacking and jumping. Oh, thank you, thank you! and the duck rushed, straddling over to where we were seated, and hid completely under Attila's wing.

—Now it's time for the new guests to tell a story.

—You go Attila, Wilfred I said.

—Oh, no, I can't, I have stage fright, Attila whispered.

—I'll go then, Wilfred II stepped forward. I'll tell you a story of me and my brothers when we were very young. We grew up in a forest with many fir trees. Every





once in a while men would come and paint trees in strange colours and then cut them down. One evening, when we couldn't find a mouse to play cricket with—hearing this, the mice in the audience took a step back—, we were looking for something else to do. And as we were flying about, we came across a can of paint and a brush. Wilfred IV and I carried the paint, Wilfred III the brush, and Wilfred I gave the directions. The men marked the trees with a red "X", so we tried to copy them. After the first five or six trees we got the hang of it, and it really looked very pretty, so we went and covered our tree with "X"s all over. Afterwards, we put the paint and the brush back and went to bed when it was close to morning. Our father was in the study, preparing our lessons, the things he would teach us the following day. We decided not to tell them how pretty we had made the house, we were going to let them see it for themselves. But we had hardly had time to fall asleep when we were woken up by a horrible noise, and the tree was shaking: the men had returned and they had begun cutting our tree down. We got out, just in time, too. When we looked around, all the trees we had marked were cut down. No one in the forest could understand how such a thing could happen, but it all turned out for the best: they let us move into the largest oak-tree in the forest, and we didn't have any lessons for a long time after that, either, Wilfred II giggled. Everyone clapped, and then we all went to sleep. The duckling was a little active, but seeing that everyone was sleeping, he did the same.



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Early the next evening we all got ready to go, and set forth after a good meal. From the fortress' walls we could see all around. It was a clear night. We joined the river in its course once more, the owls flying ahead, then came Squeaky and Attila and McPeck. We were flying quite low over the water. There were mosquitoes everywhere, but Squeaky didn't even notice them.

- Look, Squeaky, a snack, said Wilfred II pointing at the insects.
- I'm not hungry, Squeaky pouted.
- Now that's something you don't hear every day, smiled Wilfred IV.
- Say, are you migrating birds, too? McPeck interrupted.
- Not really, but we're migrating now, answered Attila.
- Where are you going?
- To the North.
- But when you migrate you're supposed to go to warmer places, not colder ones.
- Well, we're not your average bird, Squeaky answered.
- You certainly *are* a very funny bird, McPeck giggled.
- I'm not a bird, I'm a bat, and proud of it.
- Do bats migrate, too?
- They may not, but I do.
- You don't even have feathers, or a beak. Funny bat, McPeck giggled again, and then went over to fly with Attila, leaving Squeaky to fly on on his own.

The river flowed quietly, the scenery was pretty much always the same: trees here and there, hills, valleys, plains. It was a silent night.

– Where did the funny bat go? Where is he? McPeck's sharp little voice got everyone's attention.

Squeaky wasn't there.

– I saw him just a little while ago, where could he have gone? We'll all split up, and we'll meet back here, Wilfred I decided.

Each of us went a separate way, calling his name.

– Psst! Psst! Who are you looking for? asked the fir-tree we had stopped on. I might be able to help.

– What was that? Was it the wind going through the leaves? Wilfred I asked.

– It was the fir tree. One second.

Rolling out of my pouch, I got nearer to the branch:





- We're looking for our friend, Squeaky.
- Yes, I know, the whole forest knows it. Who is he?
- He's a bat.
- A bat... Wait.

The fir tree moved his branches in the wind. The fir trees around him did the same thing, and those further on, too.

– Your friend is on the other side of the river, hanging from a branch of a maple tree. The maple tree just told me. Hurry!

– Thank you, Sir. Good night!

Off we went, crossed the river, and soon found the maple tree. Before we had had the time to call out to Squeaky, we heard a loud crash. We quickly flew around the tree, and there, sitting on the ground with his round belly in front of him, was Squeaky. But he wasn't alone. McPeck had flown to him before us, and he was straddling quickly over to Squeaky, brushed him clean with his fluffy wings:

– There you are, Mr Funny Bat. I was worried for you. Did I upset you?

– No.

– My mummy always told me that I should always be careful what comes out of my beak, because once it's out, you can't take it back in... Did I say something bad?

– No.

– I once let a fly out of my beak. Mummy was right, indeed: there was no getting it back in afterwards. I miss my mummy...

– Me, too...

– You knew my mummy?

– No, but if she was like mine, I understand why you miss her.

McPeck sat down on the ground next to Squeaky.

– I like you.

– Who?

– You, Mr Funny Bat. I like it that you have fur and not feathers. I wish I had fur, then I wouldn't worry about moulding. And I like it that you don't have a beak... mine is so wide.

– But you're a bird, you're like them.

– I'm not like them, I'm one of a kind. That's what mummy used to say. She said it to me when I was the first one to fly out of the nest, and she also said it when I went fishing, and mistook her foot for a fish that was putting up a good fight. I didn't quit until I had taken a good bite out of it... And you're one of a kind, too. And the owls, and the chestnut, and the mouse, and Attila.

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Squeaky smiled.

– Why did you fall?

– I didn't fall, I was doing the bat thing.

– What's that?

– When you... Well, this is it.

– Then I'm doing the bat thing, too, McPeck giggled. Why did you run away?

– I didn't run. I was just playing hide-and-seek.

– By yourself?

– Yes, it's much better this way. You never know where you're going to hide, but you always know where to look for yourself.

– Oh...

– And then, here you are. I'm not by myself any more.

– We should go back, though. Everyone's worried for you.

– Really?

– Yes, they all went out looking for you.

– Really? Squeaky cheered up.

– Of course. Come on, Mr Funny Bat.

– One more thing: my name is Squeaky.

– What a funny name, McPeck giggled. Let's go, Mr Funny Name.

Off they went, flying side by side. We flew behind them silently, and waited for the others.

– McPeck, you found him!

– Yes, I did. And we did the bat thing together, yes we did! McPeck said proudly.

– Come on now, we still have a long way to go.

We went into the night again. The moon's reflection in the river shone brightly.

– But if you're not migrating birds, what are you? McPeck asked.

– We're nightcreatures, Attila proudly replied.

– Well, if you're nightcreatures, and I'm flying with you—then I'm a nightcreature, too, McPeck smiled.

– Yes, you are, Wilfred IV said. Mc Peck the duckling, the nightcreature, and he laughed some more.

The hours passed and once again we could see a city from afar.

– This should be a big city. We'll need to find out the name, again, so I can write it on the map.

– But this time I don't see any sheep around to ask. We'll need to fly over the

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city.

Of all the cities we had crossed, this one was by far the brightest. And the busiest. Even at night.

—Look down there, Wilfred I. Do you see how round that roof is, and it's golden. I wonder what's in there.

—Wilfred II, don't go! Don't go! I'll... I'll... I'll tell mummy! Wilfred I cried out.

—Oh, really? Will you fly back and tell her, or will you write her a letter? Wilfred II giggled.

—Well, we can't just leave him alone. Let's all go after him, Attila said.

The roof was quite interesting, indeed. The owls kept walking round and round.

—You really shouldn't. Suppose somebody heard you, Attila said.

And then, all of a sudden, music started playing under the roof. It made the roof vibrate.

—What is that? Wilfred II asked.

—It is music. I've heard it before.

—What animal makes it?

—Not animals, people. They use all sorts of instruments. They can make an incredible song come out from the smallest little pipe.

No one said a word until the music stopped playing, and not for a little while afterwards.

—Squeaky's missing again. Does he do this often? McPeck asked.

The owls started looking for him all over the roof. There were voices down below, two men:

—*"Thank you, Bishop, this was a truly delightful concert. Now, may I tell you the reason why I'm here?"*

—*"Yes, please do."*

—*"Before coming here, I passed through Târgu Mureș, and spoke to the priest there, and through Alba Iulia, and talked to the Bishop there, as well, but they wouldn't believe me."*

—*"You don't say."*

—*"I think... Well, I saw a sign."*

—*"You don't say."*

—*"Four owls. I've seen them three times already."*

—*"You don't say."*

—*"Yes, first in my church at night, then in Târgu Mureș, then in Alba Iulia."*

—*"You don't say. I think we'll have a fine day tomorrow, not a cloud in the sky."*

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– Look, there he is, Squeaky is right over the entrance. I think he's trying to hang down from the roof. He has wrapped his toes around the ledge of the roof... And people are coming out..., Wilfred II whispered.

Just as he finished speaking, Squeaky let go and hung upside down, opened his skinny black wings widely, right in front of a fat lady, all wrapped in fur.

– “Aaaaah! Help! Help! A bat!”

Attila flew right over, grabbed Squeaky and dashed into the sky.

– “Aaaaah! Help! An eagle got the bat!”, the lady kept screaming. Everyone was looking for Attila. There was panic down below.

– We really should go, we should follow Attila lest we should get lost. Come on, everyone. McPeck, you'll climb on Wilfred IV's back. Now!

– “I wonder what all the commotion is about. What are they all staring into the sky for? Oh, my, oh, my... Look, Bishop! Look at the sky! Look, the four owls! It's a sign! Look up, look up!”

– “I'm looking, I'm looking, not a cloud. Fine day tomorrow.”

– Over here, we're here, Attila whispered from a telephone pole.

– Are those things safe?, Wilfred I asked while pointing to the pole.

– Not really, you can hear everybody's conversations from up here. Why do you think crows sit on these things all the time? They like to eavesdrop, nosey creatures.

– Attila, you were very brave. But you... you..., Wilfred I didn't get a chance to finish his sentence.

Squeaky pulled out a leaflet from underneath his wing, and handed it to Wilfred I:

– For you, I got it from that crazy lady.

It read: “The Arad Philharmonic Orchestra” on the first page.

– Vic, you know these things. What does it mean?

– Well, it is the orchestra that plays the music. The rest must be the city's name.

– Squeaky... you did it for me?

Squeaky blushed.

– I'll write the city on my map: The Arad Philharmonic. Thank you, Squeaky.

– I'll tell you, I don't understand how people who scream like that can make such wonderful music, Attila said.

– There is an explanation: it's not the same people, Wilfred IV said.

– Come on now, we should go. We've lost too much time tonight, Wilfred I said.





- It wasn't lost, McPeck firmly stated.
- I do believe the duck is getting wiser, Wilfred IV whispered to Wilfred I.
- Quite true. It certainly wasn't lost, but we still have a long way to go, Wilfred I said and we left another city, following our faithful friend, the river.



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The night was still, only crickets chatted in the grass... and then... there was a distant noise, very rhythmic. It kept getting closer and closer, until there was a huge bright angry eye right behind us. The noise was unbearable: whistles and horns, and a constant pounding. Attila, Squeaky and McPeck flew to the other side, and then a huge metal snake passed in-between us. Strangely, it carried people: some talking, some reading, others sleeping. At one of the windows there was a man:

– “I don’t normally pour my heart out to strangers, but this is unbelievable: the third man who doesn’t believe me... He didn’t even listen to what I had to say!”

– “What was it, father?”

– “Tonight I’ve seen four owls together, for the fourth time. The first time I found them in my church, at night. It’s a sign!”

– “Ah, I see. Well, I’m a lawyer. If you feel wronged in any way, come see me: we’ll find something against them, they can’t be that clean.”

– “I’m going to Budapest now, to talk to the Archbishop.”

– “Here is my card.”

– “Do you mind if I open the window a little? It’s very hot... Look! Look! There they are again, right over the river. Did you see that? All four of them. This is unbelievable, twice on the same night. It’s a sign!”

– “And, you know, I also have a very good friend who is a doctor.”

– We really should be careful. Let’s only fly over the river from here on: it is safer. I’ve been looking on the map. Soon we shall enter Hun territory. We might also meet Celts, Gepids, Ostrogoths, Avars and Franks. A little further on, the Mureș will join the Tisza, and there’s a big city built over that junction: Partiscum.

– This sounds familiar: the Mureș, the Tisza. I think I’ve heard stories about this place. It’s where Attila the Hun lived, Attila spoke. He used to be called “The Scourge of God”.

– Is that a good thing? McPeck asked.

– He was very proud of it, so it must be good. He would laugh himself to sleep every night thinking of it.

– He seems like a very nice man, said Wilfred II.

– He was, at least to my forefather. He had more than one wife, though.





—That's not very nice of him, said Wilfred I. Did he have trouble making up his mind? Couldn't he choose just one?

—He had one that was more important than the others, like the wife-in-chief. He was a great man. Whenever he went to visit his neighbours, they would all come before him and give him everything they had. They must have liked him a lot. And he liked meeting new people, too. On one of his campaigns, he went all the way to Burgundy, on another he went to Italy, and he could have conquered Rome as well, but he turned back. No one knew why. No one except my forefather. The Romans were sure he could easily conquer their city, so they were absolutely amazed when he got on his horse and ordered his army—the greatest army Rome had ever seen—to turn back.

—Why did he? asked Wilfred III.

—Attila and my forefather understood each other very well. When they got to the gates of Rome, Attila asked my forefather to fly over the city, see what was on the other side of the walls. My forefather did that, and he came back to tell the Hun what he had seen, and he had some pretty bad news for him. You see, Attila had attended a Roman banquet a long time before that, and the reason he wanted to conquer Rome was for the sweets he had eaten at that banquet. He was very fond of sweets. However, Rome had got quite poor over the years. My forefather saw that, and he told Attila that the Romans had run out of sweets. You can imagine how upset he must have been. So he went back home to his own sweets.

—Poor thing, said Squeaky. I know what it's like to really like something and not be able to find it. It's been ages since I last had a bumble bee.

—Look, we're getting close to the city. We must remember to turn left at the junction, to follow the Tisza till it joins the Danube.

—This is complicated, said McPeck.

Soon we were flying over the town. It seemed quite small and quiet.

—I wonder what the Huns look like, said Wilfred II.

—I'd rather we didn't find out, replied Wilfred IV.

—Everybody, look! In that park! Two Huns, and they're holding hands.

In the park below us, a man and a woman were walking down the small alleys, in the moonlight. They stopped under a tree and held hands while looking into each other's eyes.

—So these are the fierce Hun warriors... said Wilfred III.

The man whispered something, the woman smiled; he then put his arm around her waist, and with the other hand gently pushed her hair back. She looked down.

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With one finger he lifted her chin up and kissed her.

– How fierce, said Wilfred II.

– Come on, come on, we haven't got all night. And we have to look for a place to spend the day, said Wilfred I.

– There's a tall building right in front of us. We could easily take shelter under the roof, no one would notice. And then, in the evening, we could try some of the local specialties. The people here invented paprika, said Attila.

– Very well, then. We shall rest here.

Under the roof there was plenty of room for all of us. Squeaky was the first to fall asleep... which made it a little harder for the rest of us to follow.

– Is this a bat thing, too? asked McPeck.

– What?

– The sounds he makes. "Hrrrrr... CCC... Pfff... Psst, Psst" and the way he wiggles his nose.

– Yeah, it's a bat thing, a bad bat thing, Wilfred III laughed.

Everyone fell asleep eventually, except for Mr Whiskers:

– Vic, I'm going for a walk.

– Where are you going?

– Just to look around a bit.

– I'll come with you.

And down we went, rolling along until we found an open window, and sneaked in. All around us there were huge book-shelves full of books.

– Look at all these books, Vic, look here: "Human anatomy," "Human physiology," "Ophthalmology," "Cardiology," ... All these books about them, and not one about us. Don't they know we exist, too?

– Sure they do, perhaps they want to keep the books about us a secret.

– What do you think this is?

– A library, I suppose.

– Quite right, quite right, a voice came from the window ledge.

– Who's there?

– Guess!

– Show yourself!

– No, you have to guess. You have three guesses. If you don't guess, I'll have to go away. I can tell you I'm a bird.

– A sparrow?

– No! Bigger!





– A pigeon?

– No! Bigger! Oh, please guess, I don't want to go away, I have no one to talk to here at night.

– Then you'll have to give us one more hint.

Suddenly a gush of wind opened the window completely, and brought in a huge pitch black feather.

– A raven!

– Quite right, quite right! You guessed, oh, good, you guessed!

And in flew a big black raven with sharp claws and a sharp beak. He walked about cautiously. He had a very sneaky look. After having thoroughly inspected the room, he came down next to us:

– Hello, my name is Theodore, Theodore Schwartz. How do you do! One second, I need my glasses, I can't see very well without them any more... It's because of all the books I've read. For instance, now you look like a mouse and a chestnut to me. One second please. And the raven got out a pair of lenses held together by a safety pin, and held them in front of his eyes.

– How peculiar. I'm afraid I need new glasses.

– No, you don't.

– How do you know?

– My name is Vic, and I'm a chestnut, and this is Mr Whiskers, and he's a mouse.

– How peculiar. I thought I heard you say you were a chestnut, and he a mouse.

– That's right.

– Oh, how very nice to meet you both, then. And what are you doing here? Have you decided to study medicine?

– No, we're just passing through. Where are we exactly?

– Why, you're in the medical school library. Don't you see how many books there are around you?

– Yes, very many.

– Quite right, quite right. Very many, indeed. I should know, I'm the librarian, I've been here for years... By the way, do you have a library pass?

– No. Do we need one?

– You do, to be in the library. Hold on.

And the raven flew to a desk at the entrance and grabbed two small pieces of paper with his claws and put them on the desk. He then picked up a stamp and placed





it over a pad dipped in ink, and lifted it and placed it over the two pieces of paper, leaving the mark of the stamp on both papers.

— Now, at least one of you will have to sign the register.

— I'll sign, said Mr Whiskers, and climbed the desk.

He put his paw on the ink pad, then placed it over the register. He left a perfect print of his front paw.

— Perfect. You have a fine signature, very calligraphical. Now, I'm terribly sorry to have to tell you this, but it is almost closing time. You see, it's almost morning, and in the morning, the students come, so we'd best get going. But I'll tell you what: I should like you to come over for tea. What do you say?

— We'd love to, but our friends are outside, waiting for us.

— Really? Then you should all come. Where are they?

— Come, we'll show you.

Up we went, back on the window ledge, and just in time, too, for the door opened and someone came in. He took his coat and hat off, and sat down at the desk. He sorted out some papers, then looked at the register:

— *"Oh, no! Mice again!"*

The sun had already come up. By the time we got back to the others, the courtyard had filled with students. Walking about under the roof, we noticed they were all looking up, talking, whispering among themselves:

— *"Look there! Four owls, a bat, an eagle, and a duckling! What are they doing?"*

— *"I'll take a photo!"*

Suddenly a bright light went off from down below and startled Attila:

— Who's there? Show yourself! Who dares wake me up?

— Psst! Psst! Over here. Wake everyone up and fly over the roof to the maple-tree in the courtyard in front. I'll bring your friends. Hurry!, and having said that, the raven picked us up and flew us over.

The others followed shortly.

— Here you all are. Allow me to introduce myself: Theodore Schwartz, the university librarian. Not a book enters or leaves the shelves that I don't know of.

— How do you do!

The others introduced themselves.

— Who was that angry mob?

— Those were students of the university. They are quite harmless, though. But you'll be safe here, welcome to my house. How about some tea?

— Thank you, but all we really want to do is rest. We've been travelling all





night, and we're leaving again tonight.

– Then you will rest, and I shall prepare something scrumptious for when you get up.





Theodore led the owls, Attila, McPeck and Squeaky into a large room, where they could all sleep. Mr Whiskers and I followed him into the kitchen. It was a very neat kitchen. The dishes were carefully put away on little shelves. A cookbook served as a table in the middle of the room.

—Now, let's see if I have everything I need, and Theodore walked into the pantry—a small room which continued the kitchen. Oh, dear, I need more paprika. There's a vegetable garden right out back. I'll just go pick some peppers. The gardener doesn't seem to mind, he keeps planting them every month. I shan't be long.

The raven returned quickly, with a handful of vegetables: peppers, tomatoes, carrots, onions, garlic, mushrooms.

—There, all set.

—Are you sure the gardener doesn't mind?

—Oh, yes. Why, he even built me a nice straw figurine which he put in the garden, lest I should get lonely while picking vegetables. Now let's see, the paprikas go in last, so I shall leave them on the table.

Mr Whiskers and I sat quietly, watching the raven put on his apron and go about his business, mixing, peeling, chopping. Around noon, Squeaky got up and came into the kitchen:

—What smells so good? Ah, what's this?, he asked while picking the peppers Theodore had left on the table.

We had not really had time to warn him, when he took a bite out of the red shiny peppers. He didn't say anything, but tears started rolling down his cheeks, and in a flash he dashed out and started flying round and round the tree, faster and faster, until he spotted a fountain and jumped right in.

—*"Look, a bat fell in the fountain, poor baby"*, a girl spoke and picked Squeaky up.

—*"Look at that, he has swallowed so much water his tummy is bulging."*

Squeaky was just sitting there in her palm, his wing by his sides, his head down, his tummy outwards.

—*"He's breathing. I think he should be fine. Put him there, in the shade of that old maple tree,"* and the girl came over and set Squeaky down at the root of the tree. While she was putting him down, Squeaky hiccupped.

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– See, I told you the students are harmless. Come on, Squeaky, come up!

Squeaky tried to lift himself up. He kept flapping and flapping his wings, and just as he managed to lift himself off the ground, he hiccupped again and fell back down. He was just sitting there, with his head down, sighing.

– One second, and Theodore flew down and brought him up. This should teach you something about not eating everything you come across.

Squeaky nodded and hiccupped. Everything was ready by the time the others got up: the table was set. Theodore had brought out his finest dishes:

– It's not every day that I have such fine company for dinner. Do sit down. I've prepared insect-paprika, and mushroom goulash, and some of my special sweets. I hope you like them.

The food was greatly appreciated, and the chef complimented, which was something he rather enjoyed.

– It's getting dark, we'll have to do go soon, said Wilfred I.

– Where are you going?

– The North.

– Oh, that is far away. Where exactly is it?

– We don't know exactly. Right now we're following the Danube.

– Ah, I see. Well, let's look it up, and the next second Theodore spread out his black wings and flew off. One minute later we heard a man screaming:

– *"Come back with that, thieving raven! Come back! Will you never stop?"*

– Here we go, this book is full of maps, Theodore laid down a book with brown hard covers. "History of The Roman Empire". Let's see: the Danube, the Black Forest. This must be the North, across the North Sea... But look what it says here: "Fierce Norsemen inhabit these cold lands where darkness prevails over light. Even the few hours of sunlight are darker than in Rome." Long nights, that is what they have. "The Vikings are undefeatable sailors, their swift boats rule the sea and its creatures." You'll have to be very careful, they sound like very determined people. The truth is I envy you for the quest you've set forth on. If I weren't so afraid of cold weather because of my rheumatism, I should very much like to come with you. But perhaps another time. What is your quest? What are you looking for?

There was a long pause.

– I'm looking for my mummy, said McPeck.

– Oh, I see. How nice of you to help the little duckling.

– I'm looking for friends, said Squeaky.

– I've always been looking for Sharpsey, said Attila.

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– And I for a new house, said Mr Whiskers.

– And we... we're looking for new places to play cricket, said the owls.

– And I for a place where I can grow roots.

Theodore smiled.

– I wish you all the best of luck. Each of your quests sounds familiar to me, and saying that he brought out a book in which each page had a feather:

– My mother, my father, my sister, my best friend, my first wife – she ran off with a crow –, my second wife – she decided she wanted to have a career, so she became an air hostess for the migrating birds, until she fell in love with a wild gander and flew off with him –, my third wife – she is the reason I came here... I used to live in the attic of a painter's house, eat stale bread and cheese and drink one-day-old wine... Ah, La Bohème... And then, one day she landed on the roof. We moved in together in the Eiffel Tower, and then went on our honeymoon, and ended up here, and never left again.

– And then? asked Squeaky.

– Then... she went away, Theodore said, lowering his eyebrows.

McPeck got up and straddled over to him. With his fluffy feathers, he pushed himself gently against Theodore and smiled:

– No, no, you're wrong, my mummy told me all about these things. She didn't go anywhere, she's right here, you just can't see her any more. The same thing happened with my daddy, he got all invisible.

Theodore smiled and a tear rolled down from his eye:

– Quite right, little one, quite right... Well, I've kept you long enough with all my tales. It's time you got going, you have a long way to go. It's been wonderful having you all as my guests, and perhaps, when you're all settled in the North, *you'll* have me over for a cup of tea. It's no fun, having tea by yourself, you find you already know what you're going to say next...

– We certainly will. Thank you for having us here. Goodbye!

Off we go once more, back over the river. The air of the chilly autumn night is heavy with silence. Not a word is uttered. We breathe in silence, and exhale silence.

– I feel bad leaving him there all alone, said Wilfred I.

– What about his rheumatism? asked Squeaky.

– He's just out of practice. It didn't look to me as if he had any rheumatism at all.

– All in favour of Theodore coming along say "Ay", said Wilfred III.

– "Ay," everyone said.

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—Marvellous, I've always wanted to do that in Parliament, but they never let me: "No, Wilfred III, you're too young, you can't put something up to be voted, you have to get older..." No wonder they didn't let me... it's such fun. Let's hear that "Ay" again.

—I... think you're overdoing it. Back we go, said Wilfred IV.

—Mr Schwartz! Mr Schwartz! It's us again!

—Back so soon? What happened? And, please, call me Theo, no need to be formal.

—We've returned for you, Theo: we'd like you to come with us. Unanimously, said Wilfred II.

—Oh, I don't know... the library needs me. All those books...

—Yes, precisely! That's why it would be so good if you came along. You've read so many books, you know so much more about the North than all of us. You would really help us if you came along, said Wilfred I.

—Really?

—Of course. But you shouldn't bring along too many of those paprikas, said Squeaky.

—But I might slow you down.

—We're in no hurry, said Attila.

—All right, I'll just need a few minutes to close up, and return some books, and I really should give the gardener his hat back.

Having said that, Theodore started flying from here to there, carrying things around, putting everything in order.

—All set, let's go!

Off we start again, this time there's ten of us, cheerfully flying over the river.

—I'll sing you a song the painter I lived with used to sing: "Auprès de ma blonde, qu'il fait bon, fait bon dormir...", and so we flew into the night, in the rhythm of Theo's songs.

A little while later we were flying over a small city.

—What is this place? Wilfred III asked.

—No idea, it's not on my map, answered Wilfred I.

—Then we'll have to find out. Out of my way! McPeck called out, and down he went, right over the water, landing near the shore, next to a swan.

—Excuse me, madam! Madam!

—Miss, please! What do you want? Out alone? At this late hour of the night? Suppose your nanny found out you've sneaked away!

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– Sneaked away? What does that mean?

– Left quietly, without anyone seeing you.

– Oh, is that what you’ve done?

– Who? Me? No, no! No, no, no! No, no! Why would you say that? Did you hear anything?

– Well, because...

– Shhh, not so loud, someone might hear you.

– And that would be bad?

– Well..., the swan bowed her head. A little, yes, and she blushed.

A voice came out from behind the bushes:

– Long Neck, is that you?

The swan looked startled at McPeck:

– Can you keep a secret?

– Of course.

– Then, please, no one should know I was here tonight.

– Not to worry, your secret is safe with me, McPeck said, and then called out to the voice coming from behind the bushes:

– No, she isn’t here!

– What? another swan came out. Who are you? I challenge you to do a duel. I’ll fight for you, Long Neck, even if it costs me my life! Here you are!

– Shhh! Not so loud, said McPeck. It’s a secret.

– What is? the other swan asked.

– She’s not here tonight, McPeck said pointing at Long Neck.

– She’s not?

– No.

– Then why can I see her right in front of me?

– Because you can’t keep a secret.

Long Neck laughed:

– Thank you, chivalrous little duckling, but my secret is safe with him, and the two swans got close to each other and put their necks around each other.

– Well, my brave little opponent, what brings you out on the river at this late hour?

– It’s not late for me. I’m a nightcreature. And I need to find out the name of this city.

– Well, that’s very simple. In the centre of the city there is a huge building, and on it there is a sign with the name of the city: Senta City Hall. Everyone knows it. Got





it?

– Yes, Sir, thank you very much. A good night to you. I'd say good night to you, too, Miss Long Neck, but you're not here, McPeck said and winked, and back he came to join us with his little feathers all proudly fluffed up: Senta City Hall!

– Good job, McPeck. Here, I'll write it down. Now on we go.

The moon shines over the trees. Leaves are flying in the air. Trees border the river to our right and left, forming a wall of safety.

We flew and flew for hours, losing track of time, watching the trees on the banks shift forms. And then we noticed the moon had gone from over our heads, and the dark sky was slowly lighting up.

– It's almost morning, we'll have to find a place to rest. Perhaps a little further from the water edge, said Wilfred I.

– Yep, yep, that's what we do, travel at night, sleep during the day, because we're nightcreatures, that's what we are, said McPeck.

– We certainly are, agreed Theo. Now look over there, beyond those trees: I see a little lake.

– Let's land there, and I can catch some fish tomorrow, said Attila, and it was all agreed upon.

We found the perfect place on the ground, amidst high bushes, sheltered by trees. As soon as we landed, everyone fell asleep right away. When I got up, it was noon, the sun was high. The others were still sleeping in the shade.

– Mr Whiskers, are you asleep?

– I can't sleep in this bright light. Shall we go for a stroll, Vic?

– Yes, let's.

Off we went, strolling through fallen leaves and twigs. On the bank there was a fallen tree. We climbed it, and went out over the water. Suddenly, a shadow covered the sky, and when we looked up two wings were flying over us, and a pair of claws passed right next to us.

– Look out, Vic! Run! Help! Help!

And then it went away. A big wide bird, with "V" shaped wings. And then it turned and headed for us once more... and missed us again. We heard:

– Oh, how embarrassing, how very embarrassing... Oh, my eyesight...

Before we knew it, Theo was right there, covering us with his wings:

– Who are you, and what do you want with my friends?

– Who am I? You have the audacity to land on my lake and ask me who I am...

Well, I'll tell you who I am: I am Baron von Gulp, I'm the seagull who owns the fishing





rights for this lake.

– Seagull? But aren't you supposed to live out at sea?

– Yes... perhaps... but I settle for what I can get. And this lake is quite enough for me. What would I do alone with a whole sea? Now, who are *you*?

– My name is Theodore Schwartz. I'm a librarian, but right now I'm accompanying my friends on their travels, Theo said, and introduced everyone, even those still sleeping quietly in the bushes. Why did you attack my friends?

– I thought I saw a fish. I'm sorry, my eyesight isn't at its best. Well... you're welcome to stay on the shore, but I hope you're not thinking of fishing in my lake.

– Why not?

– Because it belongs to my family.

– How many are you in your family?

– Just me.

– And isn't it a lot of fish for only you?

– I never said you couldn't have some fish, I just said you couldn't fish it. I'm not being absurd, you know.

– Don't you have any relatives?

– A few. They're still in Russia. You see, when the Bolsheviks came to power, my grandparents couldn't stand the regime: they left Russia and came here. Some remained here, and were forced to take on their lake peasant seagulls from the old country. Everything they once owned had been confiscated.

– Do you have many friends here?

– I'm a baron, I can't befriend anyone. And, also, there aren't many seagulls here. Most of them prefer the sea.

The seagull landed on the log near us, and got closer and closer, until his round yellow eye was almost touching me.

– I see you now. What a silly mistake. I really am sorry. Please accept my apologies, I didn't mean to mistake you for a fish.

– That's quite all right, we understand.

– Have you lived here all your life? Theo asked.

– Yes, all my life. With occasional trips to the village fish-market when I can't fish myself.

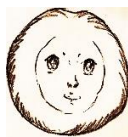
– And you've never had friends?

– Why would I need friends?

– To talk to.

– When I feel like talking, I'm a very good listener. Why would I want to talk





to someone else, to have them interrupt me all the time?

– To go fishing with.

– But then I'd fish for fun, and not just for lunch, and that would be unfair to the fish.

– To have someone come over and make you a cup of tea when you have a cold.

– But without friends you have no one to catch the cold from. No matter how you may put it, I'm better off without them. What good are your friends to you?

– Without them I wouldn't have started on this journey, and I've been so waiting to travel for such a long time.

– You mean, without them you would be now indulging yourself in a nice cup of tea and scones in your comfortable home. Huh! von Gulp laughed. Where are you headed, anyway?

– To the North. Haven't you ever wondered what it's like to live on the sea?

– Crowded. Too many seagulls there.

– But do you know how many different types of fish live there?

– I probably wouldn't like them anyway.

– You can't know until you try. And, you know, we expect to cross a sea: the North Sea.

– And just what do you think you'll get out of that?

– Out of what?

– Me leaving my lake to come with you.

– I never said you had to come with us.

– Good, because I won't.

– But you could if you wanted to.

– Why would I want to? von Gulp frowned.

– Can't you think of any reasons?

– Oh, yes, I can think of many reasons.

– Name one.

– To meet other seagulls.

– Name another.

– To fly over the wide open sea, feeling the direction the wind is blowing.

– Name one more.

– To find my soul mate.

– Good. Then it's settled: you're coming with us.

– I am?





– He is? Squeaky flew over and landed next to von Gulp. Hello, I'm Squeaky.

– Aaaaah! What is this, a fish with wings!

Squeaky took a step back and lowered his chin, letting his lower lip fall out a little.

– Don't take it personally, Squeaky, he can't see very well, Mr Whiskers whispered to him. Squeaky is a bat.

– Oh... I don't know if it's proper etiquette for a baron to be friends with a bat, von Gulp lifted his beak and looked at Squeaky from underneath his eyebrows.

– Then we won't be friends and that's that, Squeaky mumbled while walking away.

A few moments later McPeck was straddling over the log:

– Squeaky's upset, he's doing the bat thing again.

– The bat thing? von Gulp asked.

– Yes, falling down from branches.

– Poor thing, that's a hard job.

McPeck got closer and closer to von Gulp, and then all of a sudden von Gulp called out:

– Oh, my, Jelly fish! Yummy!

– Noooo! No, no! McPeck is a duckling.

– Ohhhhh, von Gulp sighed in disappointment. I guess I'm just really hungry.

– If you let us fish, we'd share with you.

– I can't do that.

While von Gulp was sitting down, his stomach gurgled.

– Oh, how well I've slept... I'm hungry, Attila came forth stretching his wings. Hello, he said to von Gulp, who was sitting at the other end of the log, looking sideways at Attila, switching sides.

– Are you really? Really? von Gulp asked.

– Well, I might be, Attila smiled and blushed.

– A salmon? von Gulp jumped up.

– Nooo! Look! Attila spread his wings out. Look! I'm an eagle!

– Oh, dear, I am sorry, von Gulp sat down again and his stomach went on gurgling.

– Suppose you didn't know we were fishing, then it would be all right, wouldn't it? Theo asked.

– How could I not know when you've just told me?

– But you might not see it.





— Right..., von Gulp thought about it a minute. If I don't see it, I can't stop it. True. All right. Go, then, and I shan't look.

Attila rushed to the lake and started gathering fish, one by one, bringing them ashore.

— Ready? von Gulp asked with his back turned.

— Just a second, there. All right, you can look now.

Attila had gathered a lot of fish and they were all piled up on the shore.

— What? Look where?

— There, near the bushes.

— What bushes?

— Come on, this way, Theo led von Gulp to the fish. Now, I'll start cooking. You all just wait a little, and I shall make us a delicious feast.

By the time everyone was up, the meal was ready: fish soup, fish filled with mushrooms, fish fillet. We all sat down to eat, and after dinner von Gulp frowned:

— Now, if I'm to come with you, I must find someone to leave behind, in charge of the lake.

— What about that ferret over there?

— No, no... he's on my list, you know.

— List of what?

— Of vengeance.

— Why did you add him on that list?

— Oh, I never add anyone, they add themselves, on their own.

— How?

— They do something that deserves revenge.

— What did the ferret do?

— He carved a fish out of wood and let it drift on the water. Since my eyesight isn't that good, I thought it was a real fish and I dived for it, and got it, and swallowed it... I had trouble flying for a while after that.

— I see, said Wilfred I. Who else is on your list?

— There's the toad, as well. Whenever I got near a fish, he would croak and scare him away. But I've already been avenged.

— What did you do?

— Oh, I don't do anything. You see, they add themselves to the list, and revenge just comes, and I cross them off, but I don't actually have to do anything. The toad caught a bad cold, and not only was he covered in red dots, but he lost his voice, too. He got better, the dots faded into orange, but he still hasn't got his voice back. Last I





heard he was seeing a speech therapist.

– Have you really no friend to leave the lake to?

– No, not that I know of.

– Acquaintance?

– I'm not good at socialising.

– Whom do you spend Christmas with?

– What's Christmas?

– Oh, dear, this will be harder than we thought, said Theo. Perhaps we should post a note on all the trees: "Trustworthy keeper for the lake wanted for indefinite time." And we'll see who applies for the job.

– Great idea, said Wilfred I.

– All right, but I get to choose him, said von Gulp.

In no time at all the trees were full of notes and applicants started arriving. The first to come was a little water snake:

– Hello, I'm here for the announce... announce... announcement, he said with his tongue sticking out.

– Now, how will you impose respect when you lisp and stutter like that, von Gulp jumped up, and the snake slid away.

The second to come was a badger, with his two front teeth sticking out. Von Gulp came really close to him, not giving him a chance to speak:

– What happened to your teeth? Didn't you wear braces when you were little? Serves you right for not obeying your parents.

Squeaky, who had been tightly hanging on to a branch all this time, jumped down, spread his skinny wings, lisped and almost shouted:

– You're mean! That's what you are, exorbitantly mean, unbelievably mean, mean beyond any doubt. Not everyone has to be exactly like you to be nice. I'm sure the snake is a really happy chap, and the badger seems very energetic, and with a good administrative side, but you don't even give them a chance! Your mind is as narrow as your beak! You know what I think? I think the lake should be equally divided between all those interested enough to come here today. I'm sure they'd all take good care of it.

– Well... I have to say, you seem to be a rather clever bat. A little too outspoken for my taste, but I'll overlook it.

Squeaky frowned and puffed his cheeks.

– I mean I'll get used to it, von Gulp tried to smile. All right, divide the lake! All the animals got together and, after having carefully discussed the matter,





they brought forth a plan: the snake would manage the bottom of the lake, the badger the shores, the toad the sludge, and the list went on. Von Gulp agreed to everything, and afterwards he turned to Squeaky:

– What is your name again?

– Squeaky, and he stood proud.

– Well, I'm very happy to make your acquaintance. I didn't really mean to upset you earlier, you know, it's just the way I am.

– It's all right, but you should know that sometimes, before just being who you are, you should consider how others will perceive you, because being who you are isn't always what others see you to be.

– Right... I see... Of course, I'll keep that in mind.

– Now that we've settled the matter, we really should get going, said Wilfred I. Our next stop is Cusum. We'll need to turn right on the first river the Tisza meets, which is the Danube.

– When you think that the Danube comes from the Black Forest and the Black Forest is just a stone throw away from the North... we're so close, said Wilfred II.

We leave the lake behind, and all those taking care of it wave as we disappear into the night. Fog covers the lake tonight. It's so thick we can't even see the trees on the sides of the river.

– Now, pardon me, is it just me and my eyesight, or is it really hard to see? asked von Gulp.

– It's foggy. We'll need to stick close together, said Attila.

– You'll look my way every once in a while, won't you? Just to make sure I'm still flying alongside you, said von Gulp.

– I have an idea. Just to reassure you, wouldn't it be helpful if we talked all the time? Then you could follow voices, as well, said Wilfred I.

– Brilliant. Yes. Please.

– All right. What shall we talk about?

– You still haven't told me what Christmas is.

– Oh, right. Well, Christmas is a happy time of the year. In the forest where we lived, we could see the people of the village hang all sorts of funny and colourful ornaments on fir trees, and, when we flew over the village, it smelled of freshly baked cookies everywhere. It was delightful, said Wilfred I.

– In the little town that I come from, on Christmas Eve people used to dress in red and green and go from house to house and sing cheerful songs. And all over the town they put statues of people dressed funny, and stars, and little houses, said Theo.

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—Where I come from, from up high on the mountain peak, I would see the whole valley all lit up, and children's voices echoed. And at midnight they would file in a row and carry candles. From afar I could only see a row of little lights crossing hills and valleys in the cold night. And then I knew it was Christmas, said Attila.

—When my son was little, before my wife ran off, I used to go look for cheese, and I would sneak into the sweet shop in the village and help myself to some sugar plums, or oranges, or gingerbread. And I would hide them well until Christmas Eve and wrap them in colourful leaves, and then give them to my son and wife. They were so happy to be surprised, and they munched away so joyfully, said Mr Whiskers.

—When I was little, on Christmas Eve all my friends used to fly into the village and play Who-can-bump-into-the-Christmas-tree-and-make-it-shake with the fir tree that people decorated in the town square. When they got older, they even managed to knock it over once or twice. I never played, though... I liked to just hang from a branch of the Christmas tree and pretend I was a pretty ornament. Once I held on tight and I didn't fall. One Christmas, a little boy saw me and started calling out: "Mummy, mummy, look how nice this funny little doll is!" I was so happy he noticed me that I wanted to hug him, so I spread my wings. And then he started crying, and his mother screamed, and I had to fly away... I liked being there, in the centre of the town, seeing everyone going round and round, laughing and singing, said Squeaky.

—I've never had a Christmas, said McPeck.

—But you've just been born, said Theo. It just hasn't been that time of the year, I suppose.

—How unthoughtful. It's not my fault I wasn't born earlier. They should have been more considerate and had a Christmas for me, too.

—I've never had a Christmas, either.

—Really, Vic? asked Wilfred II.

—Yes. I, too, was born too late.

—Well, you'll have plenty of Christmases from now on. Why, we'll have a Christmas every day, said Wilfred II.

—As a matter of fact, Christmas comes from the North. I read it in a book. That's where it started, and then it spread everywhere, said Theo. So they must have great Christmases up North. We'll have great Christmases, we will...

And then he went silent...

—Oh, dear, oh, dear... I'm sorry if I was mean before. Oh, don't leave me here alone. Have I got lost? Where are you? Where are you? I'll never be mean again!

—We're all here, don't worry, we wouldn't let you get lost, even if you are a

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little mean once in a while, said McPeck, and he flew over and pressed his cheek against von Gulp's.

— Really? von Gulp smiled.

— Yes, really. You're one of us now, you're a nightcreature.

— Yes, I am. I've never been anything else except myself, but no more Baron von Gulp. No, now it's von Gulp, mean creature of the night!

In order to show his bravery, von Gulp rushed forward so fast that he didn't give Attila a chance to get out of the way, and flew right into him.

— Easy, creature of the night, or we'll both be creatures of the river in no time.

— Sorry, von Gulp laughed. I got carried away, he laughed again, a high-pitched laugh.

— Look, this is it! This is the Danube! How marvellous! Look how far we've come! It's upstream from here, Wilfred I called out. We'll soon reach Cusum, and we'll find a place to spend the night there.

We kept talking until we reached the city. It was a big and crowded city, lights everywhere.

— What's going on? Is it day already? von Gulp asked.

— No, it's the lights below. Look there, over the hill. It looks like a fortress. It seems quiet. We'll go there. This way, von Gulp, this way... Here we are. Watch your step, we're about to land, said Wilfred I.

— Look at those funny round houses. This is different from all the fortresses we've seen so far, said Wilfred III.

— I've seen it in a book. This belongs to Gepids and Avars, Ostrogoths and Franks. No wonder it's different, said Theo. I think we could spend the day in one of these round huts. They must have been used as sentry towers, so we'll see everything from up here.

And down we went through a little hole at the top of the hut, and found ourselves in a cosy place. Soon afterwards, the sun rose over the river, almost setting it on fire. The Danube flowed large and silent: our gateway to the North. In the morning light the fortress opened up, much bigger than we had thought it to be.

— Mr Whiskers, are you tired? Care to go for a stroll?

— On such a beautiful morning, definitely.

We got out of the little hut and went down the stone-paved walkway. We were wrong in assuming the huts were sentry towers. The fortress had very tall sentry towers. We climbed some stairs and went up a tower.

— Look there, Vic, where the wall goes into the river. How skilled these people





must be: they built part of the fortress under water. Do you suppose the enemy attacks them by water?

– I really don't know. They built stairs that go into the river, too. Perhaps they can live underwater.

– *"Hello there! Welcome to the Fortress of Petrovaradin."* Down below a man was leading the way for a group of people. *"This is a medieval fortress. In the course of time, the city of Novi Sad belonged to the Romans, the Huns, the Turks..."*

– Vic, I'm worried. What are all these people doing here?

– Perhaps they're getting ready to fight a battle.

– We should leave early tonight, before the fighting begins. Look there, on the river: a huge fish. It looks as if it were made of iron. And what noise it is making. Look! Another one! What is this?

– I think those are ships. Like the ships the parrot told us about. They're heading upstream. Maybe they're going to the North. Come on, let's get the others and get on board.

We quickly woke the birds up, warned them of the upcoming fight, and we all agreed the ship would be the fastest way out of here, and they could rest on board. We caught up with a ship heading in the direction opposite to the one in which the river flowed, and found a hidden spot on deck to rest. We quickly fell asleep only to wake up a few hours later in a terrible racket, sirens and bells.

– Is this a war? Don't hurt me! Don't hurt me! I surrender! von Gulp yelled covering his head.

– Shhh! It seems we've arrived in a big city. There are lots of ships here.

– *"Hello ladies and gentlemen. Welcome to the Port of Vukovar. We will be docking soon. Please remain seated."*

– Sit! Sit! Didn't you hear, Wilfred II? Who knows what they're about to do! said Wilfred I. I believe the name of the city is "The Port of Vukovar". I'll write it down.

The ship bumped into something.

– That's it, I've had enough of this contraption. I think it's going down! Let's go! said Attila, and away we went, flying over the ship and the city.

There was still light outside. We flew over the centre of the city, and all around we could only see ruins. We landed in what seemed to have been a large building, but the only part left of it was the façade.

– How strange this looks: just like my library. It can't be very old, said Theo.

– There must be many strong bats here, and they're probably playing Who-

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can-hit-the-wall-and-leave-a-hole. Look how full the wall is of holes, said Squeaky.

—What do you think happened to this fortress to make it look so old? asked Attila.

—Usually it's the passage of time that causes the walls to tumble down. That's what happened to the fortress I grew up in. Perhaps time passes faster here.

—Then we shouldn't stay here for very long. My eyesight is bad enough as it is, and it only gets worse with time, said von Gulp.

—You rest a little longer. I'll fix dinner, and we'll leave by night fall, said Theo. Vic, Mr Whiskers, would you like to keep me company while I look for something to eat?

—Of course, gladly.

Up we go again, over the trees and meadows.

—More houses there. They're all the same, torn down. Say, Theo, why are we heading back to town? Mr Whiskers asked.

—I saw a pastry shop on the way here. We'll get dinner there.

—Isn't it dangerous?

—Not at all. The people working in shops are usually very nice, they leave the food outside for you to help yourself, and, when you do, they come out and try to show you how glad they are you took some food: they scream and jump up and down, and wave their hands. You'll see. There it is.

We flew lower, through a park, down an alley with trees on each side. Looking up we could see bits of sky through the yellow leaves. A delightful smell came with the wind.

—Aaaah, cheese cake! said Theo. And we'll pick up some nice croissants, too. But first we need to make another little stop.

—Where?

—The ophthalmologist.

—What for?

—Glasses for von Gulp. Shhh, we're going in now.

We landed on the pane of an open window. Inside there was a man in a white robe and a little child.

—*"What does this line say?"*

—*"A, B, D, R"*

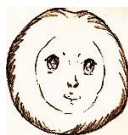
—*"And what do you see here?"*

—*"A house, a shoe..."*

We flew behind the doctor, towards the room next door.

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- "And here?"
- "A raven! A raven!"
- "Not so loud, I hear you. So you see a raven?"
- "Yes, yes, a big black one."
- "I'm sorry Mrs. Robowicz, I'm afraid he's going to need glasses..."



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In the other room there were big glass cabinets full of strange looking pieces of glass.

– What are these?

– Eye-glasses. Now let's see... We'll take them all.

– Won't anyone mind?

– No, that's why they're here, to help those who can't see very well. They're going to help von Gulp see.

– But he won't be able to wear them, his head is too small, and these are made for humans.

– We'll just take the arms of the glasses off, and he'll wear them on his beak. Perfect: a doctor's bag. I'll put them all in here. Hop in you two, as well. Off we go to the pastry shop.

We couldn't see exactly what was going on, but, when we reached the pastry shop, Theo threw in cookies, and croissants, and freshly baked bread. It all smelled so nice.

“ – Come back here! Come back you! Come back!” a voice yelled from below.

– See, I told you: they're so delighted you appreciate their pastries, they want you to go back for more.

It was quiet back at the fortress. The others were waiting for us. Everyone loved the pastries.

– Now, von Gulp, I have a surprise for you. I've got you glasses, said Theo.

– What for?

– Your eyes.

– Oh, thank you, but my eyes can't see very much as it is, there really is no point in going to the trouble of getting anything for them.

– These should help you see better. Let's try. What about this one? Theo held a pair of glasses in front of von Gulp's eyes.

– What about what?

– Can you see me?

– What happened to you, you shrunk?

– Then this one?

– Now, you've gotten sooo big...

– All right, this one then?

– Maybe...





- And now?
- I can see! I can see! My, you *are* big!
- Good, now one second, I'll take the arms off.
- Why did you take them away? Why did you do that? First you help me, then you leave me blind again? What kind of a friend are you, rubbing it in like that?
- Wait just one second. There, and Theo placed the glasses on von Gulp's beak. You'll need to straighten them every once in a while, though.
- Oh, how beautiful... Those trees, and the flowers, and the sky. I've never seen a sunset before, von Gulp sat on his back and watched the crimson sky for a long time. How beautiful, how beautiful, he kept sighing.
- Come along now, we'd best be going. Don't worry, the sun will set again tomorrow, said Wilfred I.
- Promise? asked von Gulp.
- Well... it's a fact, the sun rises and sets every day.
- Promise?, he opened up his round eyes, which through the glasses looked even bigger than they were.
- I guess.
- Let's go then, I can't wait to see the world!



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We left the house worn out by a time that went by too fast, and returned to our wide river. A quiet night. The water flowed peacefully like a satin sheet lifted by the wind.

– That’s the moon! All these years of seeing just a little bright spot. Look, it’s smiling! Hello, moon! Hello, trees! Hello, stars!

– Come now, we mustn’t be too conspicuous, said Wilfred I. Tonight we’ll be entering Hun territory again. If we could only find another boat to travel on, we’d get there faster.

– Let’s sit here and wait for one, said Squeaky. I’m tired already.

– No. We’ll go, and when one comes along, we’ll land.

– Yes, captain, Squeaky nodded.

In the cool evening air, we were all concentrating to hear the sound of a boat, but all we heard was:

– Hello, lime-tree! Hello, oak-tree! Hello, poplar! Hello, rock! Hello, sedge!

– Shhh, von Gulp, not so loud!

Suddenly a bright light opened right in front of us: a boat. But it was headed in the opposite direction.

– We’ll need to pay attention, these things can be silent as well, said Theo.

So on we fly. Just a little way down the river:

– Squeaky! Come out, where are you? Has anyone seen him? asked Attila.

– Oh... dear. Again. Let’s all spread out. Where could he be this time...

– Hold on. I may have an idea. You said when a boat comes along, we’ll land.

Maybe he did. Maybe he’s on the boat that passed, said Wilfred III.

– That boat was going in the wrong direction, said Wilfred I.

– You never said which direction the boat should be headed in.

– Oh, dear... Let’s catch the boat.

We flew closer and closer to the boat. There were people on deck walking, talking.

– We can’t just land there, they’ll see us, said Theo.

– I’ll go, I’m small, no one will see me, said McPeck.

McPeck landed on the upper deck and straddled along, calling out for Squeaky.

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— Now, let's see: what do bats like? They like to hang upside down, so I'll check the sails. No, it doesn't look like he's here. They like mosquitoes, so I'll go close to the lights. No, no Squeaky here. They like... attention!

— *"Help, help, a bat!"*, a terrified voice called out.

McPeck ran over to look, and there was Squeaky, tangled in a line, dangling in the wind.

— Attila, Attila, hurry! He's stuck!

Attila rushed over and picked him up and flew away.

— *"Help! Help! An eagle got the bat! An eagle got the bat!"*

— *"First you scream because of the bat, now you scream because the bat is gone. Make up your mind, lady!"*

— Thank you, Attila. There you are. Why didn't you land sooner? asked Squeaky.

— Because this was the wrong boat, said Wilfred I.

— How do you know?

— It's headed in the wrong direction.

— Maybe it will turn.

— Suppose it doesn't.

— You've got to take a chance in life.

— All right, enough. Let's go now.

The night was silent again.

— Hello again, lime-tree! Hello again, oak-tree! Hello again, poplar...

— You missed one, said Wilfred II.

— What?

— A tree.

— Where?

— There, in the grass, there's a cone. It will grow into a fir tree. If you're going to greet trees, you're going to have to greet them all, you can't just greet some, the rest will feel neglected.

— But I couldn't possibly greet them all... von Gulp sighed, and then he was quiet.

— Look, look! A boat! A boat! Squeaky called out in excitement.

Coming up behind us there was a huge boat, going the right way, too.

— Everyone, get ready to land. We'll land on the upper deck, there's no one there.

Everyone on the boat was seated inside. We could see and hear them through

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the windows.

– “I can’t believe my bad luck... I got off the train to make a phone call, and then I got back on the wrong train. No one checked my ticket. They saw I was a priest and assumed I was going in the right direction. I ended up in Belgrade instead of Budapest. And all the trains to Budapest were sold out for another week. Unbelievable. So here I am, on this ferry boat touring the Danube. But never mind, it’s for a good cause. I’ve had a sign, you see. I’ve seen four owls, flying together over and over again. I’ve seen them in my church and then along the way...”

– “Excuse me for one minute, please. I’m going to get more coffee.”

– “Of course, I’ll go get a breath of fresh air, too... What a wonderful night. Where could those owls be, I wonder... When shall I see them again?”

– We’ll spend the night here, in this box. Perhaps even the day. I’m sure we’ll be able to find food as well, said Wilfred I.

– Of course you will: this ship is full of food. I should know.

– Who said that?

– I did. Skipperoo, Captain of this fine ship, distinguished mouse. At your service. Now, if it’s food you want, I’m afraid the kitchen only opens at midnight, when all the people have gone to bed. Are you enjoying your journey so far?

– Yes, thank you.

– Good, good. Now, excuse me, running a ship is a hard job, I have more passengers to see to. I’ll see you at midnight and we’ll have dinner together.

– Yes, we look forward to it. Goodbye for now.

And Skipperoo was on his way, walking across the deck, very proud of his territory.

– We have a great view from up here, we can see both banks of the Danube. How wide it seems now, said Wilfred II.

– Hello willow tree, Hello cloud shaped like a horse, Hello evening breeze, said von Gulp.

– Oh, dear... I’ve created a monster, mumbled Theo. Why do you have to greet everything?

– Because I’ve never seen them before. And I just can’t help myself, everything looks so nice.

– Well, look there, then: water lilies. Don’t miss those!

– Hello water lilies, Hello mosquitoes!

– Mosquitoes? Where? Oh, snack! Snack! and out dashed Squeaky, flying right above the water, cramming all the mosquitoes he could fit into his mouth.

– Look in the water, is that Squeaky’s reflection? asked Wilfred III.

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– Fly up! Fly up! von Gulp called out and flew over to Squeaky.

– Hey, I didn't know you liked mosquitoes, too. But there's no need to hurry like that, there's plenty here to go around.

Suddenly, a huge open-mouthed fish jumped out of the water, headed straight for Squeaky. Von Gulp opened up his claws, and just as the fish was about to bite Squeaky, von Gulp grabbed him and flew around with him. Squeaky hurried back to the others, and von Gulp followed still carrying the fish.

– What will you do with it? asked Theo.

– I don't know, what do you do when you catch a fish? I've never caught a fish before. I've tried, and tried, but I have never actually caught one.

– Well... we're having dinner with the captain, so perhaps you should throw it back in the water.

– All right. Bye, fishy! Bye!

The fish quickly disappeared into the depth of the river.

– Are you all right, Squeaky? asked von Gulp.

– Oh, yes, thank you, thank you! Squeaky pushed his little head against von Gulp's feathery shoulder. If it hadn't been for you...

– You would never have gone out there in the first place...

– Oh, but I would have. You don't know how I get when it comes to mosquitoes.

– Well, there, there. All gone now, von Gulp said, while patting Squeaky's back with the tip of his wing.

Before we knew it, it was time for dinner.

– This way, please, follow me. The ship is all ours, said Skipperoo.

– What about your other passengers?

– Well, it seems you are my only passengers tonight. My popularity might be dropping a little, but you'll see, my services are impeccable.

We entered the first room, with large couches, armchairs, and tables.

– This is the lounge, next comes the dining room, and here is the kitchen. Let's see. Here, take a seat on these cookbooks. Today we have a three course meal: we'll start with our famous fish-soup, and then –

Skipperoo opened a huge door:

– And then we shall have cheese, mushrooms, salad, and whatever else we can find in this refrigerator. And for dessert we'll have whipped cream and raspberries.

– Oh, how delightful, said Theo.

– Napkins for everyone.

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Saying that Skipperoo handed out napkins and then tied one around his neck:

– Now, dig in!

– Look what I've found! What are these little black balls, they look like candy, said Squeaky.

– Noooo! cried out Theo. It's pepper!

But he was too late. Squeaky had already put it in his mouth. As soon as he crunched it, he began to fly round and round the kitchen, hitting all the pots and pans in his way and causing a terrible racket.

– Over here, drink this, said Skipperoo pointing to a bottle.

Squeaky rushed to the bottle, knocked it over, and poured all its contents right down his throat.

– Now, just out of curiosity, what is that? asked Wilfred I.

– Sherry. The finest sherry there is!

The last drop fell and the bottle tumbled down on the floor.

– How are you feeling, Squeaky chap?

– Hic.

– Can you fly?

– Hic.

– Can you speak?

– Hic.

Squeaky just sat there, with his tummy all round, and looking silly.

All of a sudden, the doors opened and the lights went on.

– *"Mice, mice! In my kitchen! The fridge has been devastated! I quit! You'll have to get a caterer and serve food in plastic wrappers! I've had it!"*

– *"Come now, having mice is a good sign, it means the ship isn't going to sink. Just think: what good would your kitchen be at the bottom of the Danube and with no mice?"*

– *"You can have all the mice you want, but not in my kitchen!"*

– We should be going back to our cabin now, thank you for a delightful meal.

– Oh, you're most welcome. I enjoyed the company. And I hope to see you tomorrow, too. You, too, Squeaky! You are cut out for a sailor: the way you drank that sherry!

– Hic!

Attila picked Squeaky up and crossed the dining room. Just as we entered the lounge, we heard voices, and hid behind a couch.

– *"Why can't you sleep?"*, a woman asked.

– *"I don't know, perhaps something I ate. Maybe because of all that paprika"*, the man





answered.

– Hey, have you seen Squeaky? He was here a second ago. I put him down next to me, but he isn't here now, said Attila.

– Whee! Whee! Squeaky went, while jumping up and down on the couch and flipping.

– *“Oh, dear, whatever I ate must have been really bad... I think I'm seeing things”,* the man said.

– *“What do you see?”*

– *“Well, now I see a bat jumping on the couch.”*

– *“Should I go get a doctor?”*

– *“No, I'll try to sleep. Sleep is what I need... Just look at that bat go...”*

– Squeaky get down from there! Wilfred I called out.

The two people left the room and Attila grabbed Squeaky again.

– Hello, Attila. Have I told you lately that I really like you? Both of you, Squeaky grinned showing his teeth.

– Come on, let's go. You'll get some sleep and feel better.

We reached our cabin, and each of us took their place. Soon, we dozed off, swung by the slow rocking motion of the ship.

– Whee! Whee! Squeaky screamed, while flying up and down on the deck.

– I'll go get him, said Theo.

– No, look: two men are coming. Maybe they won't notice him, said Wilfred I.

– *“Do you hear that?”*

– *“What?”*

– *“That high pitched sound.”*

– *“A bug, or a bird, or something...”*

– Squeaky, be quiet!

– No one will tell me to be quiet! I shan't be quiet ever again. All my childhood they told me to be quiet. – Daddy, you know what I saw in a tree? – Be quiet! – Hey, everyone, you know what game I'd like to play? – Be quiet! – Mummy, I have something to tell you, I'm leaving. – Be quiet! Well, I'm not quiet. I shall be heard. Whee! Whee! and he started flying closer and closer to the two men.

– *“Do you believe in ghosts?”*

– *“No, it's just a bug.”*

– Hey, I resent that! I'm no bug, and he opened his wings and flew right into them.

– *“Run, run! A ghost!”*

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The two men ran off and Squeaky fell down. McPeck rushed over:

–Squeaky, Squeaky! I'll listen to you, talk to me. You know, you're not the only one that sort of thing happened to. It's just that grown ups don't see things the way we do, so because we see things they can't see, they think we're lying. But they don't think we do it on purpose, they think it's part of growing up. The bad thing about growing up is that you begin to overlook things. Then, by the time you grow old, you overlook so many things – you begin to forget.

McPeck was interrupted by a loud snore.

–Come on, McPeck, he's sleeping now. He'll sleep for a while. Come to the cabin, said Theo.

–Poor thing, there's nothing worse than having something to say and no one there to hear it, I should know, said Attila. When I was out flying over the mountains, because there was no one there but me, I used to imagine I had a lot of friends, and I would tell them everything I saw, and I would say funny things, and they would laugh and want to hear more. And I'd take them to see places no one except me knew about, and they could keep secrets. I could confide in them, I could tell them about Sharpsey, and they understood. When I had just hatched and I had no friends, I thought I'd start making friends when I started to fly. And then I learned how to fly, and I was flying everywhere, but I didn't make any friends. I thought I'd meet them when I was out on my own, hunting, fishing... I've been on my own for a while now...

Von Gulp, half asleep, let his head fall on Attila's shoulder and sighed, then said smiling:

–But it was worth the wait, wasn't it?

Attila smiled.

–We always had mummy. She always listened to us. She was so good at listening that she could even hear things we didn't actually tell her. Like that time when grandma came to visit. She was always telling us what to do, where to go, how to talk, what to say. So one day we painted a yellow sun on the inside of a hat and covered her eyes. She thought it was daytime for many nights and slept on. Everyone was worried why she didn't come out of her room for so many nights, and she snored frightfully. Then mummy found out. I don't know how, because we never told her. She didn't say anything, though. She pretended it never happened. Grandma didn't know anyway, Wilfred II giggled.

–Yes, mummy did always listen, but she didn't always hear us, said Wilfred I. I remember the time when we were playing hide-and-seek, and Wilfred IV hid so well we couldn't find him any more. After a whole night of searching for him, I tried

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to tell her. I said:

– Mummy, I have something to ask you.

– Yes, dear, she answered.

– Do you think we play nice games?

– Yes, dear.

– Today we played hide-and-seek.

– Yes, dear.

– Would you be terribly upset if, while playing, one of us was lost and never found again?

– Yes, dear.

– Would you want to know if it happened?

– Yes, dear.

– Well, it has happened.

– All right, dear, you can go back and play now.

– Did you ever find him? McPeck asked very worried, with his eyes wide open.

Wilfred IV coughed a little, and the others smiled.

– He had gone to sleep. Playing had worn him out, so he went to bed. Just like that, without even telling us.

– I didn't want to disturb you, you were having such fun, Wilfred IV answered.

– Yes, looking everywhere for you, thinking a predator got you. Incredible fun.

– You were worried for me? Really?

– What did you think?

– That you didn't want me to win. After all, I was the last one and you didn't find me, Wilfred IV giggled.

– Are you saying you did it on purpose, to win?

– Well... a little.

– Why, I'll tell mummy! Wilfred II called out. It's not fair!

– Go right ahead, hurry back and tell mummy. We'll wait right here for you till morning, said Wilfred IV.

– I'll tell her... later. But it's still unfair. There are rules, you know. When you play a game, you're not allowed to mix serious things in. And letting us worry like that... The game is annulled!

– You were really that worried? Wilfred IV went near his brothers and put his wings around them.

– I never knew how nice it is to have someone hear what you say, said von Gulp. I used to talk a great deal, but things are completely different when there is





someone there to listen to you. Listening is such a small thing and it makes such a big difference. Not everyone knows how to listen: listen to friends, listen to strangers, listen to the wind, to the river, to crickets.

—Crickets? Squeaky asked half asleep. Yummy.... Hrrrr..., he was snoring again.

—We should all get some sleep, we'll probably arrive in Aquincum tomorrow. Good night, everyone.





We fell asleep in no time, but soon enough we were woken up by a loud voice:

– “Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. Thank you for choosing Belgrade Danube Tours. We have reached our final destination. Welcome to Budapest!”

– Budapest, oh, no! Where are we? asked Wilfred I.

– Calm down, it’s probably just a name the locals use for the city. Many cities have more than one name. Look here, Aquincum is known for its baths. It seems Roman soldiers are very fond of bathing. We’ll just have to fly around and find the baths, and then we’ll know we’re in the right place, said Theo.

– What a marvellous idea! Let’s fly around! Let’s see the world! von Gulp called out and flew ahead, while Squeaky and McPeck followed.

– Here we go. Hold on, Vic, Mr Whiskers. We’ve never flown over a city during the day.

– Hey, stop, hide! Someone’s coming! Wilfred IV called out. Squeaky and the others waited behind a tree.

– “What a marvellous day! Such a bright autumn sky! Perfect for my meeting with the Archbishop. And he’ll believe me, I know he will”, the man spoke to himself while stretching his arms.

– Come on, owls, fly quickly over here. Right behind him, said Attila.

– It’s too risky. We’ll wait until he goes away.

– Hello, passengers, said Skipperoo. What seems to be the problem?

– We can’t get off the ship without that man seeing us. We don’t want to cause a scene.

– Why not? I do it all the time. Here, watch. I’ll distract him. You have a safe trip from here on.

Saying that, Skipperoo went straight for the man’s feet, and started dancing on the tips of his shoes, singing:

– One step left, two steps right, and if I shake my tail right, you won’t sleep at all tonight!

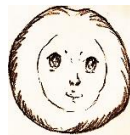
– “Aaah! Help! A mouse!”

We quickly took off and had just left the ship when the man turned towards us:

– “Owls! It’s the owls! I’ve been blessed. Blessed! A miracle! Humanity must rejoice!”

– “Look over there, dear. A priest, and he’s jumping up and down on the deck yelling





'Humanity must rejoice', " a woman said.

– "Don't worry, dear, he probably ate a little of what I ate and it didn't agree with him. The food on this ship is really frightful" the man next to her replied.

– "Oh, so you didn't like my food, did you? Well, that's it! From now on all you parasitic passengers will eat food provided by caterers, in plastic containers. No more fine cuisine, you tasteless, ungrateful little people! I worked wonders as it is. With a kitchen full of mice, you can't expect me to cook dishes they serve at the Ritz!" a fat man dressed in white puffed.

– "Mice?" everyone screamed.

A man in a suit came running out:

– "Come on now, mice are really nice little creatures."

– "Well, you know what? You can have your mice cook for you, because I..." the man in white yelled.

– "Quit? Again?", the one in a suit interrupted.

– Hey, that's a good idea! I can cook. I can make better food than that chef any time! Skipperoo said, and ran over to the man in the suit and hugged his foot. I really like you, even if you're a little too tall. You make a fine second in command!

The man looked down at his foot:

– "Ooooh... a mouse...", and then he fainted.

– Here you are, come on, quickly. Look over there, further down, there's an island in the middle of the river. Perhaps we should spend the day there. It's not safe to travel in broad daylight, said Attila.

We tried to keep away from everyone and soon we reached the island: a forest in the middle of the tall buildings of a crowded city.

– Ah, this is nice. Quiet at last. No wonder people are so uptight when they hear noises all day, said Theo while stretching his legs on a branch.

But we had hardly had any time to settle in when a monstrous noise startled us. The tree we had landed in was shaking.

– What's going on? Who's attacking us? asked Wilfred I.

– I'll go see. Take everyone down at once, replied Attila, and off he went, inspecting all the branches, going round and round the tree. Excuse me, Sir, are you stuck there? You really should be careful, I think there is a violent creature lurking about... Sir?

A little bird was hanging on to the bark with its beak in a hole in the tree.

– Perhaps you should come with us, to be safe?

The bird took his head out and looked at Attila astonished:





—Sa—sa—safe fr—fr—from who? he asked. Nonsense. I'm perfectly sa—sa—safe, and he moved up a little, and with a few quick motions of the head he started hitting the tree with his beak, drilling a little hole, and making a huge noise.

—Pardon me, but why do you do that? Attila asked.

—D—d—do what?

—That. Make that noise. Drill the holes.

—What a si—si—silly que—question. Why, be—be—because that's what I—I—I do. Why do you f—f—fly?

—To see new places.

—In th—th—that case, th—th—that's what I'm doing, t—t—too. You'll have to p—p—pardon my st—st—stuttering, but I get so worked up when I p—p—peck. By th—th—the way, I'm Hammer Istvan, I'm a woodpecker.

—I'm Attila. Can I call you Hammer then?

—Why would you c—c—call me by my last name?

—What is your first name then?

—Istvan, of c—c—course. What did you think?

—Then why didn't you introduce yourself as Istvan Hammer?

—Bec—bec—because that's not the p—p—proper way to do it. You know awfully li—li—little for an eagle.

—I'm not from around here. Me and my friends come from far away.

—I s—s—see. C—c—come on, I shall show you around. Wel—wel—welcome to Mar—Mar—Margaret Island!

—Did you hear that Wilfred I, there are two separate towns here. Write it down on the map: Mar—Mar—Margaret Island, said Wilfred II.

As soon as we had all been introduced, we started our tour of the island. On the way, we passed a big building:

—And th—th—there are the baths. People are str—str—strange, they c—c—come all this way to b—b—bathe in public.

—Are there many baths around here?

—Yes, many. B—b—both here and in the city. I d—d—don't know why they need so many when the D—D—Danube flows right through the mid—mid—middle of the city.

—Can we find anything to eat here? Squeaky asked.

—Of—of—of course. I'll t—t—take you to the best place there is: Paprika-Varos.

And so, a few spicy meals later, we were all set to leave again, since it was

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getting dark.

– Why are you in su – su – such a hurry? Where are you g – g – going?

– To the North, said Wilfred I.

– Really? Is that f – f – far?

– We think it is.

– And aren't you af – af – afraid to go on such a long j – j – journey? I've never left the island, you know.

– No, we're not afraid at all. If the worst comes to the worst, and we don't like it there, we'll just come back, said von Gulp.

– Oh, my... You'd g – g – go all that way and b – b – back? How b – b – brave! If you return, do p – p – pay me a visit on your way b – b – back.

– If not, we'll send you a postcard, said Squeaky.

– Oh, w – w – would you? My address is The Tree Full of Holes, Margaret Island, Budapest.

– Budapest? Isn't this Aquincum? That's what it says on my map. Look!

– Yes, I see... but I d – d – don't know. I'll tell you who might know, though: the learned p – p – pigeon over at St. Stephen's in the city. It's the b – b – big building with the round roof. He's always th – th – there in the evening. His name is Whitebeak, ask f – f – for him.

– Thank you, we'll go there right away, and we'll write soon. Goodbye.

It's dark already. The days get shorter, more time for us to travel. From up here it's easy to spot the round roof of St. Stephen's.

– What do you think is in that building? asked von Gulp.

– I should say it's a church, answered Theo.

– How do you know?

– Because of the name: it starts with "Saint".

– What's a Saint?

– A man after whom they name churches.

– Are there many saints?

– Well, there must be. Just think, every time they build a church they have to come up with one.

– Does anyone keep track of them? Lest they should name two churches after the same saint.

– I think it's allowed. People don't have that much imagination.

– Then why not just name all the churches after the same saint?

– Because then they wouldn't be able to tell them apart. You see, people have





eyesight problems. They can see buildings, but they can't really see what is around them: the trees, the flowers, the birds – which would help them find their way.

– Why don't they get glasses then?

– Because they don't know they have a problem. They've never seen those things, so they don't know they can't see them.

– The sun has set, they should respect the darkness, but instead they make their own day, mumbled Squeaky grumpily. Look at all those lights... I can't even fly straight.

Beneath us cars passed, and the street was brightly lit, the buildings, too.

– I agree, I can't see very well during the day, but that doesn't mean I go and cause a perpetual night for everyone, said Wilfred I.

– This is all very distracting, with all these lights moving, but we've got just a little bit more to go. It's not the people's fault, it's just that we don't belong here any more than they do in the forest, said Attila.

– Don't worry everyone, I'm here, I'll get you there safely, said McPeck.

– Say, weren't you supposed to meet your cousins on the Danube, McPeck? asked Wilfred IV.

– Yes, but I don't know where.

– We'll ask Whitebeak where wild ducks usually meet. He'll know for sure.

McPeck nodded, then looked down and sighed.

– Here we are, said Attila. Now where should we land?

– In the tower, in the middle. That's where I'd stay if I were a respectable pigeon, said Wilfred II.

– Hey, hey! Watch your wings! Who are you? How dare you just come in out of the sky without warning? I'm not that young any more. At my age I don't need added distress, a voice bellowed from below.

– Hello, we do apologise for crashing in unannounced. We're looking for Whitebeak.

– Well, it seems this is your lucky evening: you have come across me, Whitebeak giggled.

– Oh, good evening. We've come to you because the woodpecker on Margaret Island said you're a very learned bird, that you know everything, and we have a few questions to ask you, said Wilfred I.

– Well... go ahead, but I hope they have nothing to do with mathematics. I'm terrible in maths. I have never been able to count my own children. And now they've gone off, got married and had children. Now that is truly distressing: I don't even





know how many they are. Every time I begin counting, and I add one more, one more, I just fall asleep... I'm not a bad bird, you know, I'm just bad in maths.

—No, no, what we'd like to know has nothing to do with maths. We have a little dilemma: we thought this town was Aquincum, but everyone calls it Budapest. Is it Aquincum?

—Let me see your map. Well... it should be. It might have been Aquincum when the last Mayor was running it. This must be it. The new Mayor must have changed its name. And he probably doesn't want anyone remembering the last Mayor, so he must have passed a law to forbid calling this town anything else except Budapest. Ha! Politics for you! Damn politicians! Next thing you know they'll be forbidding pigeons in the city!

—I see... And one more thing. Our friend got lost and he needs to find his family. Do you know where wild ducks stay?

—Wild ducks? Oh, I'm afraid you've missed them. They left a few nights ago.

—Did you hear that, McPeck? Wilfred I turned to McPeck, who was beginning to smile.

—Yes, I did, I did. This means I can come with you! McPeck jumped right into Wilfred I's feathers.

—But won't you miss your family?

—They migrate every year, maybe I'll see them again some time.

—Everyone, quick, on the ledge of the tower and on the roof! Whitebeak called out. Someone's coming!

The owls stayed on the ledge while the others flew up to the roof. A light came on in the tower to the right.

—*"Ah, there we are. It really was a pity for you to have come all this way and go without seeing the city by night. What a view!"*

—*"Yes, Archbishop. Thank you. Can I tell you about the signs now?"*

—*"Sure, sure, go ahead."*

—*"Four owls, I see them everywhere. They've come all this way with me."*

—*"Really?"*

—*"Yes, I first saw them one night inside my church."*

—*"Any witnesses?"*

—*"No... But I saw them again and again. Why... I think I might even see them here, tonight."*

—*"Do you talk to them as well?"*

—*"I haven't had a chance to. Here, I'll call out, maybe they'll hear me and fly. Owls!"*

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Owls! Come out! Come out!"

– *"All right, you do that. I'll go and make a quick phone call. I'll be right back. You just keep looking for them."*

– *Maybe you should fly off now. That man is a bit too loud. I'm a pigeon, they don't even notice me, but they might not be used to seeing birds like you. And these people are so xenophobic, you know. You shouldn't take the chance, said Whitebeak.*

– *Yes, we'll all go now. Thank you, farewell! Ready? Up we go! Wilfred I said, spreading his wings, and the others followed.*

– *"Archbishop! Here! Here! They're here! Come see them!"*

– *"Doctor, please come quickly, I'm afraid he may get worked up and jump!"*

Soon a car with a loud siren and blue and red lights arrived at the church. We stayed on a little to see the colourful lights going round and round.

– *"I'm afraid he's delusional. He needs rest. Lots of rest. A long long rest, Archbishop," said a man in a white suit.*

– *"Of course, anything you say, doctor. Make sure he gets the best of treatments. The Church will pay for everything. Poor thing... who says being a priest isn't a hard job..."*

– *"I have a good friend, a psychiatrist, who runs a hospice in the Black Forest, in Germany. He'd like it there: nice view, quiet. If he gets lucky, birds singing..."*

– *"Yes, doctor, whatever you think best."*

– *"The Black Forest it is then. I'll put him on the first train as soon as he's able to stand the journey. We've sedated him for now."*

– *"How long do you think he'll have to stay there?"*

– *"It's hard to tell, it all depends on how he responds to treatment. Sometimes it takes one year, but it can also take several years."*

– *"I'll just say goodbye to him. Goodbye, my friend. You're going to a really nice place, where you can rest."*

– *"But, Archbishop, I don't want to go.... the owls", the man inside the car muttered.*

– *"Where you're going, there will be many, many owls, and nightingales, and robins. Be good and do what the doctors tell you. Goodbye!"*

– *"But the owls! The owls!"*

– *"Oh, dear, he's really lost it, poor fellow."*

– *That's nice of them, to reward a man who likes owls by sending him to a nice quiet place in the forest. I think we should send that man a postcard when we get to the North. If he likes owls, he'll be delighted to get a postcard from some, said Wilfred II.*





—Quite right, we must not forget to do that. But now, off we go again, said Wilfred I.

—Yes, off we go, us nightcreatures, fearlessly heading towards the North, called out McPeck.

—Once we leave this city behind we'll be flying over the puszta, said Attila.

—What's that? asked von Gulp.

—It's the wide open plains my forefather used to fly over. There should be many wild horses there.

—Really? I've never seen a wild horse. But then again, there are so many things I've never seen.

—I don't really see any more names of towns on the map. If we come across any, we should remember to write them down, said Wilfred I.





Once again we reach the Danube, its water flows silently under the flapping wings. A cool wind blows, a sign that autumn is slowly turning to winter. We leave the city behind, with its crowded streets and lit up bridges.

– Look, Vic, from afar it looks like the setting sun, said Mr Whiskers. Part of me wishes we could keep travelling for ever. It's sad to think we only have one chance to see all these places. I should so like to see them over and over again, and I'm sure each time I'd see them differently.

– There will be more places, we're barely half way there.

– Look! A giant! In the grass, Squeaky yelled.

– Shhh, said Theo. Not so loud, you might offend him. Horses are very easily offended.

– But why is he alone? asked McPeck.

– Maybe he's waiting for someone, Theo replied.

– I'll go ask him, von Gulp announced, and off he went, flying straight for the horse.

– Excuse me, Sir? Sir?

Suddenly the horse lifted his tail and struck von Gulp, who fell down in a pile of manure. He got up, shook himself and dived in the water to wash:

– Well... how rude! I'd never... well... how rude!

– You shouldn't have startled him, Theo said.

– He's on my list now, he is. Top of my list!

We all landed in the grass, and waited for von Gulp to come out of the water.

– What's going to happen to the horse now?

– I don't know. I just know he's on my list.

All of a sudden there was a loud noise, and two bright lights came out of nowhere. A car. It stopped. Two men came out.

– *"Look, there is another one! Zoltan will be really happy if we catch him two horses in one night."*

– *"I'll get the rope."*

One man went towards the horse, while the other stayed behind with a lasso, ready to catch the horse. The startled horse ran straight into the trap. They pulled him towards the car and shoved him in a trailer.

– Oh, no, we have to do something! We can't just let those men take him away,





said Wilfred IV.

– Cross him off your list, von Gulp! Squeaky said.

– I can't. It's beyond my control, von Gulp answered.

– You have to, this happened because of your list!

– Beyond my control.

– Come on, everyone! We'll have to do it ourselves. The car isn't going very fast, let's catch up with them, Attila said.

We reached the car, but it kept hitting all the bumps in the dirt road: there was no way we could get near it.

– We'll have to stop them, Theo said.

– I'll do it, Squeaky jumped on the top of the car, and, holding on to an antenna, he let himself hang down over the windshield and opened up his black wings. The car stopped suddenly, Squeaky was thrown quite a long way off, and the two men jumped out screaming:

– *"I told you we shouldn't have come here! It's Dracula, he wants our blood! He doesn't like thieves!"*

They ran a little, then stopped:

– *"Why do you have to be this silly? Dracula... Really! Come on, let's go back. Come on. Go first!"*

– *"No, you go first, if you're so brave."*

– *"No, you go."*

– *"Why do you think you can order me around?"*

– *"Because I'm older. Now go."*

– *"I'm not going anywhere near that car, it's cursed."*

– *"Yes, you are."*

– *"No, I'm not..."*

The men started shoving and pulling each other, tumbling in the grass.

– I'll get Squeaky. You open the door to the trailer, said Attila.

– I have an idea: hold me by the tail, and I'll open the door. I'm good at picking locks, said Mr Whiskers.

Theo held him while he got the door to open. Inside there were two horses, the brown one, who had knocked von Gulp down, and a white one.

– Come on, you're free! Run, run!

The white horse jumped out, but the brown one stayed on.

– Come on, what are you waiting for?

– He's deaf, he can't hear very well, the white horse explained. I'm Star, he's





Dandelion. Thank you for saving us.

– We have to get him out of there.

– I know, I'll go, von Gulp got in. I'll pinch him!

– Nooooo! Theo yelled.

It was too late: von Gulp had already pinched the horse with his beak. Dandelion jumped up, and hit von Gulp with his tail again, and jumped out.

– Ooooh, my head... At least I landed on something soft... Oooh, manure again.

Well, at least it worked, von Gulp came out mumbling.

– Who did that? Dandelion yelled.

– The seagull did, to save you, Star yelled in his ear.

– Really?

– Yes, they saved us.

– Really? Us? I'm so sorry, seagull, I didn't realize why you were pinching me.

– That's all right, I'm getting used to it. You have a very strong tail, by the way.

– What did he say? Dandelion turned to Star, and Star yelled it in his ear.

– And tell him that's the second time he hits me, too. The first time was by the river, but who's counting.

– Really? I didn't mean to, honestly, I thought I heard a bug.

– It doesn't matter, hurry now. We must go!

Off we all went, far away from the car, until we found a hidden place to rest a little. Squeaky was beginning to come to his senses, too.

– Where do you live? Wilfred I asked Star.

– Here, with our herd. But we got lost.

– What does your name come from?

– From the black star on my forehead. When I was born, that was the first thing my parents saw.

– And his name?

– Because he's always craving for dandelions. He could eat fields and fields of them.

– Why did you get lost?

– Dandelion thought he saw a meadow full of dandelions further off, and went there. I tried to call for him, but he didn't hear me, so I came after him. And then it got dark. And then those men found us.

– If your herd is anywhere around, I'll see them, said Attila, and off he went, flying higher and higher, until we could barely see him.

Then he came back down:





– I've seen them, they're led by a tan stallion.
 – Yes, that's my brother!
 – Come on, follow me!, Attila led the way. We flew after him, and the horses followed galloping away over the grass.

We soon reached the herd. A tan stallion came forth:

– Star, Dandelion! We've been looking for you everywhere! We thought you had been caught.

– We were, but they saved us, Star replied, pointing towards us with his head.

– Thank you, friends. What can I do to show my gratitude?

– Nothing, it was our pleasure, Wilfred I answered.

– And it was all von Gulp's fault, anyway, for putting him on that list, Squeaky said.

– Hey! I only put the brown one on my list, and the white one was caught, too. Don't blame me for things I didn't do!

A black mare stepped forth and whispered to Star while putting her head on his back:

– I'm glad you're safe.

Star put his white head on her black back, their necks intertwined, and they stayed like that under the silent glow of the moon.

– Well... time to go. It was nice meeting all of you. Goodbye!

We left the herd behind, and joined the river, flying quietly beside it. Every once in a while everyone sighed.

– Horses are such lovely creatures, Theo said.

– Yes, particularly when they fall in love, Attila agreed.

– And preferably when they don't attack you with their tails, von Gulp said.

A little further off, a strange looking path crosses the plain and then the river, and goes down an iron bridge.

– What is that? Squeaky asked.

– That must be the railroad. Those trains probably pass through here, as well, Theo replied.

– It's the loud monster-snake, again! Watch out, watch out! Squeaky yelled.

First there was a whistle, then the noise started, and finally the train passed, with carriages full of people. It slowed down as it reached the bridge. In one of the carriages there was a man sitting by the window.

– *"I'm not crazy, you know. I did see them. All four of them. Really."*

– *"I'm sure you did, no one is arguing with you. Do you like it by the window? Do*





you feel better now?"

—Let's wave to the people inside, come on! Wilfred II got closer to the windows. Hello, everyone! Hello!

—*"Look, look, it's the owls again! There they are! Look!"*

—*"Of course they are, no one is arguing with you. Nurse, another sedative!"*

—*"No, just look outside the window! It's almost as if they're waving to me!"*

—*"Nurse, double the dose!"*

A woman came in:

—*"Yes, doctor."*

—*"I know, the owls, the owls. Here, this will make you feel better. You'll only feel a little prick, then you'll go beddy-bye, you, and the birdies, and the owls... That's it, go to sleep now. This is more serious than I imagined..."*

—So this is a train... It's not a snake, it's a train, said Wilfred II. What a strange contraption people came up with in order to avoid seeing what's around them.

The train disappeared into the night, leaving no trace of its passage. In the chilly silent night, we stood in mid-air and wondered if it had ever happened, if all the things we had no proof of had actually occurred. But we're all here, we've all seen the train, we can't all be mistaken.

—Where do you think it went? McPeck asked.

—Who knows, Theo answered.

—Why do people travel?

—Because they don't like to sit still.

—Where do they go? Do they go North to look for forests, too?

—No, they like cities, and being among other people.

—Then they don't know what it's like to fly over a slow river on a cold September night, listening to leaves humming in the wind and a few birds talking about them, McPeck giggled.

It was quiet again. We'd been flying for a while when the lights of a new city started glowing before us.

—A city! We must find out its name, Wilfred II said.

We flew in, closer and closer. It was a small town, and even though its lights were on, its human inhabitants were all safely tucked away in their warm beds.

—That's the Town Square, the City Hall, but there is no one in sight, said Theo.

—Let's fly over the houses, we must find someone, said Wilfred I.

And round and round we went, but saw no one, not even an alley cat.

—What a strange town this is...

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– What if no one is out at night because they're afraid of something? McPeck asked.

– Humans always are. They're afraid of the night, in particular. What a silly thing, to be afraid of the dark. Imagine that, afraid of something you can't even help. If you have to be afraid of something, you might as well be afraid of something you can prevent in some way. What can you do to prevent the night? Wilfred IV answered.

– It is awfully quiet... I do hope there is no monster lurking about, von Gulp whispered.

– Well, with your new glasses, if there is one, you'll see it, Theo laughed. Hello, monster, and he laughed a little more.

All of a sudden, in front of us, a huge shadow started rising on two very thin legs. It was standing on the chimney of a house. Theo was flying with his back turned towards it, looking at us:

– Hello, monster!

– Theo, Theo! Perhaps you should stop.

– Why? Von Gulp knows I mean no harm by it. You're not upset, are you?

– Theo, turn around.

And when he turned, he found himself looking at a tall bird with the longest legs anyone could ever have imagined, a neck similar in size to the legs, and a long sharp narrow beak.

– Oh... Hello... Theo said.

The bird opened up its sharp beak.

– No! You leave my friend alone! Go away! McPeck leapt forward.

With its beak wide open, the monstrous creature opened up its wings and yawned:

– Well... this is really funny. First you wake me up in the middle of the night, and then you tell me to go away, leave my own home. Really... these little ones, and then she laughed. Didn't your mothers tell you that it's important to get your sleep?

– We do, but during the day. We're nightcreatures, you see, said McPeck proudly.

– Oh, yes. Looking at you, it's obvious that's what you are, she laughed again. Why are you all standing so far away? Come near, land on the roof so we can get to know each other. I'm Shorty, by the way.

We all landed and introduced ourselves.

– Would you be so kind as to sit down in your nest again? Our necks hurt from looking up at you all the time, said Wilfred III.





— Oh, of course, of course. How rude of me. I'm glad you think I'm tall. When I hatched, I could barely stand, they couldn't even see my head from the egg shell. That's why they called me Shorty. But it's nice to be tall for someone, Shorty smiled.

— So... Miss Shorty, you're a bird?

— Oh, dear me, Shorty is enough, no need to be formal. And yes, I am a bird, like you. Only I'm a stork.

— How delightful! How exciting! I've never seen a stork before, von Gulp flapped his wings.

— What do you do?

— Right now, I'm training to be a godmother. But that's not what I really want to be. I'd like to be a ballerina.

— And what stops you from becoming one?

— It just isn't proper. Storks shouldn't do that.

— But it would be better to be a good ballerina, than a bad godmother.

— Yes, you're right. But my family would never approve. They sent me here, to Vac, to the godmothers' school. And besides, who would want to see me dance?

— We would.

— Why don't you come with us? We're going to the North, you could be a ballerina there! McPeck said.

— Really? I could?

— Could what? Wilfred III asked. Be a ballerina? Of course.

— Come with you? Could I? Could I?

— Well... you'd have to adjust to our lifestyle, though. We sleep during the day and travel at night, Wilfred I said.

— And we don't have nests, we sleep in trees, Theo said.

— And sometimes we're faced with dangerous situations, Attila said.

— Oh, how nice! I've always wanted to live on the wild side!

Theo leant over to Wilfred I and whispered:

— What do we do? She's awfully big, people will notice us.

— Not many people at night, Wilfred I replied.

— With those long legs she could kick us silly in mid-air and not even be aware of it, Attila said.

— I'm sure she has some control over her legs, Wilfred I replied.

— I've seen her, storks are nice, but I'm not very sure I want to see her every day, von Gulp said.

— Then you tell her that, Wilfred I answered.

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—Well... after careful deliberation, after considering all the aspects at hand, we've decided, we've decided...

—Yes? yes? Shorty asked.

—That you are welcome to come with us!

—How wonderful! Thank you! Thank you! I hated godmothers' school. Hated it! Hated it! Shorty was jumping up and down on her long legs, and each time she jumped her nest sank a little lower inside the horn.

Suddenly the lights in the house below all went on:

—*"What's going on? Where are all these ashes coming from?"*

—*"It must be that crazy stork again! I'll take its nest down in the morning. If this is the good luck having a stork's nest brings... I'm not so sure we need it after all."*

—*"What is it doing? Is it doing pirouettes again?"*

—*"I'll go look."*

—Come on, everyone, let's go! Quickly!



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We flew just in time. The man climbed up on the roof and took the nest down.

– Will you miss it? Squeaky asked.

– Not really. It was too cramped anyway.

– Pardon me, but what did you say the name of this town was? Wilfred I asked.

– Vac. What is that? A map? Is that where we're going? What an adventure! I can't wait to get there, so I can dance and dance. And I'll never have to go to godmothers' school again, Shorty kept talking and talking.

Squeaky covered his little head with his wings, Attila stayed behind a little, Theo flew sideways, until McPeck was the only one flying in line with Shorty.

– Oh, dear me. I'm afraid I talk a little too much. I do apologize. It's just that in school all they wanted to hear was the lesson. And I did have so many things to say.

– Did you make many friends there?

– No, none. They didn't like me very much. They used to say my head was full of nonsense, that they had never heard of a stork becoming a ballerina.

– I've never gone to school.

– That's all right, I can teach you everything I know: maths, geography.

– What do you need all those for?

– A good stork needs maths, because she has to count all the animals and eggs, and she needs geography, because she needs to know where each one goes.

– You deliver babies?

– I should have, yes. Babies who didn't have parents. Awfully big responsibility. I have an aunt who once made a tiny mistake: she placed a puppy with a cat. There was a really big scandal, the cat denounced her to the High Council of the Storks, and, until the matter was settled, she had to take care of the puppy herself. Just imagine, a stork taking care of a puppy, having it in its nest, on a chimney.

– What happened to it?

– It was decided that the cat would have to raise him after all, for in her application she had only said she wanted a baby, she hadn't mentioned the species it should belong to. It was an honest mistake. It all worked out for the best, though. When the puppy was all grown up, the cat asked for another one.

All of a sudden, horrible screams came out of a house beneath us. A window opened and a woman threw something out:





– “Get out! Sickening, ugly moth! Out!”

– What is it?

– It looks like a little bird, Theo said.

– No, it’s a big moth. But it shouldn’t be out at this time of the year. It’s too cold for them, Shorty said.

– A moth? Can I eat it? Can I? Can I? Squeaky asked.

– Certainly not! That would be rude! Wilfred I answered.

The moth started flapping its wings, and it kept hitting the closed windows, trying to get back in. After a while it sat on the window ledge, flapping its wings once in a while, until it sat completely still.

– Is it asleep? McPeck asked.

– Oh, dear... Poor moth, it must be completely frozen, von Gulp sighed.

And then, in one last effort, the moth got back up and tried to get into the room, but it soon fell down.

– We can’t just let it die...

– Oh, I know, I know! In a town nearby there is a church, they call it a Basilica. It’s always all lit up, candles everywhere, it’s always warm, even on the coldest winter days. We should take it there, Shorty said.

– We’ll keep it warm on the way, Mr Whiskers said.

– I’ll go get it, Squeaky rushed off, landed on the ledge and was trying to hold on to the moth without breaking its fragile wings, when the window suddenly opened once more:

– “Vile creatures! What is this? The Apocalypse! Take that! And that! Go away!”, the woman yelled while she was trying to hit Squeaky with a broom. Squeaky flew off, with the moth in his claws. On his way up, he stopped a little and smelled it.

– Don’t even think about it! Can’t you do anything without thinking of your tummy? Wilfred I shouted.

– I wasn’t thinking of actually eating it... Just tasting it a little.

– Hand it over!

Squeaky placed the moth in the pouch next to us, and Mr Whiskers took it in his arms and tried to warm it up.

– Poor thing... Will it wake up? McPeck asked.

– Let’s hope so. His heart is still beating.

– Why did he go into the house?

– That’s what moths do, they chase lights and fly around them. Sometimes they get too close and they burn their wings, Shorty answered.





We had just left the city. The river was still flowing, quiet as always, the leaves still humming – only now we were in a hurry. We had to get to that Basilica.

– Where am I? a faint voice interrupted the silence.

– He's alive! He's alive! Mr Whiskers called out. You're safe, my friend. We're taking you to a warm place.

– Really? You are? You saved me. I felt my wings growing so cold, and soon my whole body was numb. But I'm all right now. I thought, for a second, before I fell asleep, how sorry I was I hadn't seen the world. But I'm all right now.

– What is your name?

– Mist. Because, when I flap my wings very fast, they look like a cloud, or fog. See?

– Enough, enough. Stay put down there! It's hard enough as it is with an extra passenger to carry around, Wilfred I said.

– Are you an owl?

– Yes, indeed.

– I've never seen an owl before. I've just come out of my cocoon, you know.

– Why did you? I mean, at this time of the year? You should have waited until spring at least.

– I thought it was spring. A crow landed on the ledge where I was waiting and said spring had arrived, that it was time for me to come out. So I did. And then it laughed and flew off. When it got dark I saw the light inside the house and went in.

– Why do you chase the light? McPeck asked.

– When I saw it, it looked like a beautiful princess, dancing in mid-air. I fell in love. I thought it was a ball, and I asked her for a dance, and she said yes, and round and round we went, dancing, spinning... until that woman threw me out.

– You really should be more careful, you could burn your wings like that, McPeck said.

– It wouldn't have mattered. She was so beautiful, and graceful...

– Are you warm now? Mr Whiskers asked.

– Oh, yes, very, thank you. And you?

– I'm fine, thank you, Mr Whiskers smiled.

– Where is this town we're going to, Shorty? Wilfred I asked.

– It's just a little further up the river. It's called Esztergom. I know. When I came to school, I stopped in the train station to rest. All I heard was "*The train for Bratislava leaves Esztergom at 16.00, the train for Budapest at 17.00.*" But it's a nice quiet little town. My elder sister works there. She's very happy, and the people on whose

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rooftop she lives are happy to have her, too. Look, there it is. You see that round roof? That's the Basilica. You're going to like it there, Mist. And you can wait for spring inside. It's so big, no one will mind you being there.

Esztergom was quite big. Up on a hill we could see the ruins of a castle. The Basilica was indeed huge. We landed at the entrance, in between giant pillars. We could see it was full of candles, the light and the smoke enveloped it.

— We'll take him in, you keep watch, Wilfred I said. Come along with me! he called out to his brothers.

In we flew, Mr Whiskers and I in the pouch, and Mist almost ready to come out.

— Now, you must be careful, this place is full of candles, don't fly too close to them, Wilfred IV said.

— Won't he get lonely? Wilfred II asked.

— He can't come with us, it will be very cold where we're going... Wilfred III answered.

— Don't worry about me, I'll be fine here. It's so warm, and so many lights...

— Hello, a little voice came out from the roof. Then a white little butterfly came down. Have you come out of your cocoon too soon, too? she asked Mist.

— Yes, I have.

— My name is Daisy. We'll wait winter out together. And when spring comes you can come home with me, if you like.

— Oh, I would... but I'm a moth and you're a butterfly.

— Yes, and we were both caterpillars once, Daisy laughed.

— Well, we'll leave you to wait for spring then. We've had quite a long night, we'll go rest, Wilfred I said.

— Thank you all so much for bringing me here. I think now, perhaps this was my destiny, to come out early and meet you. If it hadn't been for you, I would never have come to this place, and I should have been very sorry not to have seen it. It will be a very beautiful winter. Have a safe journey!

As we were getting closer to the door, Theo called out:

— Go back! Go back! People are coming!

— *"Well, Father, I hope you at least appreciate it. I could lose my job over letting you get off that train. I do hope you have at least calmed down a bit, and that you'll stop all that nonsense about the owls."*





– *"Of course I appreciate it, doctor. I am very grateful indeed that you allowed me to stop and see the great Basilica and pray in it. This is the town where St. Stephen was born, you know. It really is a great honour for me to be here."*

– *"You go in, then, I'll wait for you here. Take all the time you need."*

One of the men came in, walked up the aisle and knelt. He put his hands together and started whispering.

– Perhaps we should go now, Wilfred II said, and he led the way.

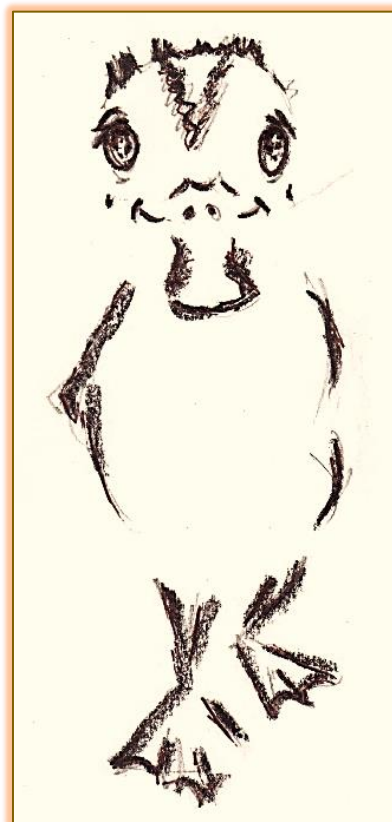
Just as he rushed off, he knocked over a little bowl full of water. The noise startled the man:

– *"It's the owls! The owls! They're here!"*

We all flew out while the man outside called for someone:

– *"Here we go again! Nurse, the sedative!"*

– It's almost morning, let's rest here, among the castle ruins, Wilfred I said.





We found the perfect spot, hidden between the walls. We were all well hidden, except Shorty, whose head could be seen from miles away. When we woke up, it was evening again. Theo got up before us and took care of dinner. He visited some of the shops in the city, with Shorty as his guide. They brought back a bit of everything: fresh rolls, fish, goulash, cakes.

– What a treat! Thank you, Theo.

– Oh, no, it's not me you should thank. I wouldn't have been able to find anything if it hadn't been for Shorty.

Shorty lowered her beak, smiled and said:

– Anything for friends.

– I have to say, though... I've been thinking. Wouldn't you like a different name? Sure, you were short once, but you're obviously all grown up now, and it doesn't really suit you any more, Wilfred IV asked.

– I... I've never had another name.

– We'll come up with something, and if you like it, it will be yours from now on.

– All right.

– How about... Long Legs?

Shorty shook her head.

– Sharp Beak?

She shook her head again. And none of the names seemed to be to her liking, so in the end it was agreed she would still be called Shorty for now, but she would choose a stage name for herself when she became a ballerina.

The river was covered with a blanket of fog. The wind kept blowing harder and harder over us. It was a cold night.

– It might rain tomorrow, Theo said.

– What we should be careful about now is the people. We're travelling on the border, and there are many tribes around: Vandals, Gepids, said Wilfred I. We should reach the fortresses of Brigetio and Celemantia soon. They belong to the Romans. Here, on the map, I see a few rivers. We'll have to follow the one that goes straight.

The fog was getting denser, we could hardly see ahead of us.

– We should figure out something to keep us all together: we could easily get lost on a night like this, said Attila.



—Let's tell stories. We can take turns. In this way we shall all hear and stay close, said Wilfred II.

—All right. Who will go first?

—I will, both Wilfred II and Wilfred III answered at the same time.

—Fine, you go.

—No, that's all right, you go.

—No, no, I insist: after you.

—I couldn't. After you.

—You go.

—I don't want to!

—Well, neither do I!

—Well, then I'll go, interrupted Wilfred I. This is something that happened a while ago, when we were all very little. One summer, our Aunt Mathilda and her son, Dumpling, came to stay with us. The forest in which they lived had caught fire.

—That's not fair, that's the story I wanted to tell, complained Wilfred II.

—Then you shouldn't have said you didn't want to go, answered Wilfred III.

—Allow me to continue, will you? said Wilfred I. Now, Dumpling was a very fat little owl, about the same age as us. He could hardly fly, because his tummy kept pulling him down. All he could manage was to go down and come back up the tree. But that didn't stop him a bit: he ran faster than a field mouse. You should have seen him. And he was always up to something, and it usually had something to do with food. He really liked honey. One day, he ran off to the edge of the forest, where a bee-keeper kept his hives. He waited for the man to collect the honey the bees had made, and, when the man wasn't looking, he snatched a jar and ran off with it. He did that once, twice, three times. The man noticed his honey production was getting low, and started thinking about bringing in more bees, which he did. Unfortunately, the new bees and the old bees didn't get along. They even declared war on each other. So, instead of making more honey, the bees were always fighting, and the man was getting anxious to see his production constantly dropping. He brought in even more bees, bigger ones. The big bees were even more aggressive, so the other two bee-populations joined forces in fighting the big bees. One day, as the bees were out fighting as usual, Dumpling got a craving for honey. So off he went, found a jar and took it home. The bees followed him, and understood what had happened: Dumpling was the reason their production was lower. So, that evening, as we were all having dinner, a horrible buzzing noise interrupted us: the bees had come to complain. Our father went out, and the bees told him everything. It was clear, something had to be

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done to make the big bees go away. Our father sat down with the bees and talked, and together they came up with a plan: every day, when the big bees went out to gather pollen, Dumpling would have to take all the honey from their hives and put it in the other bees' hives. Dumpling agreed to it right away. He went every day, conscientiously, he took all the honey out, some he put in the other hives, some he ate. After a while, the bee-keeper came to the conclusion the big bees weren't producing any honey, and took them away. When the job was done, Dumpling was twice the size he had been. The rest of the bees lived quite happily after that. But Dumpling's cravings for honey got even worse. He went about looking for it, and he found it in a bear's den. Every day he went and took one of the bear's many jars, which he kept in his pantry for when he would hibernate. One evening, as we were all enjoying a quiet meal, our tree started shaking, and before we knew it, there was a bear's head sticking in our dining room:

"I want my honey back!" the bear roared.

Our father immediately turned to Dumpling, and Dumpling jumped under the table. Our father talked to the bear, and convinced him that a little diversity in his diet would do him good.

"Not eat honey? Then what should I eat?" the bear asked.

"Have you ever tried raspberry preserve?"

"No... Is it sweet?"

"Oh, yes, very. And fragrant, too. Here, try some."

The bear loved it. So Dumpling spent the rest of that summer picking raspberries and making preserves. By autumn, the bear's pantry was finally full. After a summer of cooking, Dumpling never wanted to see anything sweet again. He has lost a lot of weight since then. He has grown up to be a handsome young owl. And he's still the fastest running owl.

—My turn now, my turn! Wilfred II called out. My story is about Dumpling, too. We were all out playing one night. We were playing owls and mice. No offence, Mr Whiskers.

—None taken.

—So we decided me and Wilfred III would be the owls, and the others the mice. They'd run and hide, and we'd go and look for them. We looked and looked, and we found Wilfred I, and Wilfred IV, but there was no sign of Dumpling. When morning came, we went home and told the others. Aunt Mathilda started screaming her head off:





"My poor little birdy, he could be freezing and starving somewhere out there. What have you done to him?"

Our parents told her to calm down, and we all went out to look for him. Suddenly there was a loud scream. We rushed over and found Dumpling stuck in a rabbit hole. He had eaten all the rabbit's carrots, and his belly was so big that he couldn't get out any more. The rabbit tried to get him out by pinching him, but he couldn't move at all, he just screamed.

"My poor baby!" aunt Mathilda went to him.

"Your poor baby, lady? You should keep this bottomless pit at home, he should be a rodent, not a bird. He ate everything he could find!" the rabbit complained.

"Mummy!" Dumpling called out.

"Yes, dear, are you all right?"

"I'm hungry!"

"Well... carrots aren't really food."

"Not food, eigh? Then why did he eat them all? I'll tell you this: your little monster isn't leaving until I get my carrots back!"

Our parents talked to the rabbit, and he agreed to help Dumpling out if he and his mother built his vegetable garden. It was really fun seeing them digging and planting, in their feathers full of dirt. I don't know why, but after that summer they never came back to visit, Wilfred II giggled.

—I'll tell you a story now, said Squeaky. One winter, when I was very little, it had just snowed over the forest, and I really wanted to go out. My parents were busy, so my mother asked some bats who were a little older than me to take me along. I was so happy to be flying along with them. They wanted to go into the village and take the little children's hats and toys, but they couldn't take me with them, I would only get in their way. So they let me wait there, under a tree, and said they'd pick me up on the way back. I waited. It was quite cold, and my bottom was frozen from sitting in the snow, so I got up and started walking about. I walked and walked, but no one came for me. It was almost morning already. I thought something had happened to them, so I headed for the village. By the time I got there, the sun was up. I saw a group of children and flew towards them. Suddenly, one of them started screaming:

"Another bat! Another bat! Watch your hats! Attack!"

Before I knew it, snowballs were coming towards me from every direction. I flew off as quickly as I could, but a snowball hit me, and I fell down.

"Let's get him!"





Just as they were closing in, a bark made them keep their distance. They ran off. When I looked up, I saw a huge head, and then I felt a warm nozzle on my tummy.

"What are you doing in the village in broad daylight?"

"I'm looking for my friends."

"Your friends left a long time ago, before midnight. Where do you live?"

"In the forest."

"Where?"

"Up a tree."

"Where is this tree?"

"In the forest."

"Come on, let's find it," and the dog picked me up and took me back into the forest. "Is this the tree?"

"No, it's bigger."

"This one?"

"No, with more branches. There, that's it."

He dropped me off in front of the tree and then went back to the village. It was already dark again. When I got home, my parents were just getting up:

"There you are. Did you have a good time?"

I didn't answer, I just went to bed. A week later I saw the other bats, they were all right, carrying around the things they had taken from the children of the village. Every evening that winter I went to see the dog. He lived in a little cottage with a little girl and her family. We had great times, playing around in the snow. One evening, the little girl went skating over the frozen lake. The ice broke and she fell in. I flew over to tell him as quickly as I could. He jumped into the water and saved her, and he became everyone's hero. They even let him sleep in the house with them after that. Every evening I'd land on the window ledge, and he'd get up. I put my hand on the glass and he put his nozzle.

— What happened to him? McPeck asked.

— I don't know, the family moved away, and he didn't know how to write, so we couldn't stay in touch. But I had a friend.

— What about the other bats?

— They were sure I had told on them, about forgetting to pick me up, so they avoided me. But I didn't want to play with them anyway.

— I have a story, too, said Shorty.

— Tell us, said McPeck.





—When I was young, I used to play with my elder sister every day. The only decent game a stork could play was Godmothers. So we found little animals and carried them around, pretending we were taking them to their mothers. We were flying about looking for babies, and we came across a wild gooseling and a pelican. My sister got the gooseling, and I got the pelican. He was a very nice little chap. We started talking. I just kept following my sister around as she pretended she was flying over mountains and oceans. We started talking. I told him about my dream to become a ballerina, and it turned out he wanted to become an opera singer. So we sat down, he sang me a song or two and I danced for him. We got to be very good friends, and we decided we'd build an opera house together. We came up with our own songs and dances, and all we needed was an audience. I went out and started gathering an audience. I brought all kinds of animals and birds. Our first show was a success. They wrote about us in all the newspapers. Unfortunately, my father read about it, and he had me sent to my grandmother's until I was old enough to go to school. But my grandmother lived right over a dance academy, so I learnt quite a lot. I used to dance for the sparrows and the pigeons, and they always asked for an encore.

—What happened to the pelican?

—Last I heard he became famous: he was touring the Danube Delta.

—Von Gulp, don't you have any stories? Theo asked.

—Stories about what?

—Growing up.

—I don't remember growing up. I've been like this ever since I can remember.

—Come now, there must be something that happened to you that you can remember.

—I do remember that one time a wild duck broke away from the others and landed on my lake. It kept making these frightful noises. He stuck his beak in the water and blew air and watched the bubbles.

—I know, I know, that's so much fun, McPeck laughed.

—What did you do? Theo asked.

—I tried to reason with him. I told him the lake was private property and the water wasn't his to bubble up and down. And do you know what he did? He spat at me. A mouthful of water, and then he turned his tail towards me and swam the other way. I had no choice. I put him on my list.

—What happened to him?

—A hunter appeared out of nowhere and, before I knew it, he had shot the duck. He got him in the wing.

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- What's a hunter? McPeck asked.
- It's... it's a man who... doesn't like ducks, Wilfred I answered.
- So what does he do?
- Actually, a hunter is a man who likes ducks so much that he wants them all to himself, said Theo.
- So what happened to the duck? asked McPeck.
- His wing was in a bad condition, he couldn't fly any more. I was stuck taking care of him the whole winter. I was beginning to wonder just who had been put on the list, me or him. In spring he got better and joined the other ducks. I didn't even get so much as a quack for having taken care of him all winter.
- And did that upset you? asked Attila.
- No, not really. I suppose I couldn't let him freeze and starve to death...
- If hunters want to keep ducks, why do they hurt them? McPeck asked.
- They don't realize what they're doing, Attila answered.
- Are hunters bad people?
- No, just people.
- I have a story, too, said Attila. A while back, when I still lived with my brothers, we used to go fishing together. I really liked being out over the river with them, talking eagle things. We started fishing, and I was very fast. My pile got bigger and bigger, while they couldn't catch any. I felt bad. They wanted to catch fish so badly. So, when I caught one, I would fly over and drop it in one of their piles. They soon began catching, too, and their piles got bigger as I kept adding to them. At the end of the day, their piles were bigger than mine, so they decided the winners must get all the fish and they split my pile among themselves. I didn't mind. When we got home, they gave our parents all the fish. My father asked me what I had caught. I told him the fish I had caught was there, but he didn't believe me. He said that, if I wanted fish, I had to go catch it myself. I wasn't really all that hungry, anyway.
- Did you go fishing with them again after that?
- Yes, quite a few times. My father never believed I could catch fish until the day he left.
- Where did he go?
- To live with one of my brothers.
- Does he come to visit on Christmas?
- No.
- Does he write?
- Not really.





—So how does he know you're all right?
 —He assumes it. And I am. Never been better.
 —We're almost there everyone, there's the city. It's a good thing they have those strong lights. Now, watch out for Roman soldiers, said Wilfred I.

We flew along quite carefully. We could see the fog rushing over the streets in the headlights of passing cars.

—Everyone, fly higher now. There's a bridge ahead, Attila let us know.

As we passed over the bridge, a huge truck crossed it. In its windshield there was a bright sign. It read: "Attila". Attila saw it, and suddenly turned back and started to follow the truck. We tried to keep up with him.

—What are you doing? Theo asked.

—Didn't you see that man's sign? It read "Attila". Perhaps he knew Attila, and perhaps he even remembers my forefather.

—Are you out of your mind? How will you talk to a human?

—I have to try!

Attila reached the truck just as it got off the bridge. He rushed forth and stopped in front of the windshield. The truck suddenly turned right and left the road, going over a field. Then, there was a terrible noise and the truck rolled over. Its doors opened and loads and loads of fruit came out: bananas, oranges, tangerines, little green fruit, small red ones. Wilfred I reached Attila and grabbed him, his brothers helped restrain him, then Shorty came and carried him away. Squeaky and McPeck went to check up on the driver, see if he was all right. When they got close to his window, he came out. Soon, another loud car with bright red and blue lights came. The field was now full of mice, and they were all calling out:

—A feast! A feast! Let's celebrate!

Two men in dark suits got out of the loud car and came up to the truck driver:

—*"Are you all right, Sir?"*

—*"Yes, fortunately, I'm fine."*

—*"What happened, Sir?"*

—*"Just as I left the bridge, an eagle popped up in front of me, from out of nowhere. It was huge. I tried to avoid it, so I steered right, and before I knew it, I was out in the field."*

—*"I see. What happened to the eagle?"*

—*"The strangest thing: four owls came to get him, and then a stork carried him away."*

—*"Right... What else can you remember?"*

—*"I saw a raven and a seagull who was wearing glasses fly off with the rest."*

—*"Aha... Did you get all that constable?"*

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The two men went back to the car:

– *"Let's get a blood sample. He must be drunk."*

The trucker called out to them:

– *"One more thing, officers: a bat and a little duckling joined them, too."*

– *"Do you think he's mocking us?"*

We flew off quickly. A little further ahead we saw a strange-looking fortress. Instead of a roof, it had a garden, with bushes and trees. We decided to stop there for the night.

– I'm sorry, I don't know what I was thinking... I just wanted to know more about my forefather, Attila said.

– That's all right, old chap, no one was hurt. And the field mice really like you now, I'm sure, Wilfred IV smiled.

– We're all glad you're all right, said McPeck, straddling up to Attila and sticking his little beak among his feathers.

Attila put his wing over him.

– And it's a good thing that man is all right, too. If he had been hurt, you would have felt bad about it.

– Yes, all's well that ends well, said von Gulp. I have to admit, I never thought having friends would bring so much excitement into my life!

– Thank you, everyone, Attila spoke in a soft voice.

– We'll stay here for now. It's too foggy to go on, anyway, said Theo.

We all found our places, we were still shaking a bit. Squeaky moved over closer to Attila and whispered:

– I'm really glad nothing happened to you. I always thought of you being so big and strong, and then when I saw that truck... and... well... I'm glad you're fine.

– So am I, Attila smiled.

Suddenly the ground we were sitting on started to move, and a voice called out:

– Who is this? Get off my head! What is it with all this rioting? Don't you have homes to go to? Who's sitting on my head?

We all stepped away, and a small black creature came out of the ground, digging his way up with a pair of small pink paws.

– Where are you? I can't see very well.

– We're all right here, Wilfred I answered.

– All? How many of you are there?

We introduced ourselves.

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–Aaaah... So many... Well, I'm Lawrence. I'm a mole, and the engineer of this fortress, but all my friends call me Digger.

–Did you design and build this fortress? Wilfred I asked.

–Oh, not all of it, only the secret tunnels.

–Where are they?

–Well, if I told you, they wouldn't be secret any more. All I can say is that you can see a little heap of dirt at the entrance. But I wouldn't advise you to go in unaccompanied: they're not well secured.

–Does this fortress belong to Romans?

–I don't know. Right now there's only me here. But I don't spend a lot of time above the ground, either. I just do my job. So for all I know, this place could very well belong to Romans. Never met them. What are they anyway?

–They're people.

–Then of course this place belongs to people. But why didn't you just call them that? Do Romans have an extra arm, or leg, or head?

–We don't really know, we've never met them, either.

–Do you know where we could find something to eat here? Squeaky asked.

–There are a few apple trees further down. I should know, I keep bumping into their roots all the time.

–Thank you, we'll go get some apples, then.

–Hold on a second. I told you where you could find food, I never said you could actually eat it. You'll need to file an application.

–Where should we do that?

–Here. You can give it to me. But I only work in the morning.

–But you're here now.

–Yes, but now I'm off duty.

–Couldn't we give it to you for when you go back on duty? This way we can have something to eat before morning.

–No, you couldn't. Suppose your application were denied.

–Why would you do that?

–What makes you think I would?

–Well, you're the only one here.

–True... it wouldn't be personal, though.

–Wouldn't you rather we picked the apples in the tree? This way they wouldn't keep falling over your tunnels. Doesn't that bother you? Theo asked.

–Oh, yes, terribly. They do give me such a headache.

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—So we'd be helping you keep your tunnels open. We'd be working on the infrastructure.

—You could say that.

—And in that case there would be no need for an application any more.

—Very true.

—Then we'll get to it right away.

—Very well! Very well!

—We'll leave tomorrow evening, so that you know.

—Fine, fine! It was very nice meeting you! And if we meet again, we do, and if we don't, the important thing is that we've met. Once you meet someone, the deed is done. Do a good job with the apple tree! Good night!





PART III

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We did do a good job, we picked all the apples, and those we didn't eat we left on the ground for others to take. It rained a lot the following day, but it stopped before dark. The air was chilly, and there was a little cloud flowing over the Danube.

– Perfect weather, said Squeaky.

– Time to go again, everyone. Tonight we'll start our way towards Limes Romanum, but I'm not very sure we'll be able to reach it in one night, said Wilfred I.

– It doesn't look like we have any mountains to cross, it shouldn't be that hard. We just have to make sure we follow the Danube. Straight ahead, said Theo.

– Straight ahead, straight ahead... But look, if I face this way, then straight ahead is in that direction, and if I face this way, then straight ahead changes, too. How do you know we're going the right – straight ahead – way? asked von Gulp.

– We just have to follow the bigger river, that's easier, said Wilfred III.

We followed the river until the city was completely out of sight. On our way we passed many little lakes and islands. The damp earth gave out a warm cloud. In the silence of the night, we suddenly heard a voice behind us:

– Wait up, wait up! Where are you going?

When we looked back we saw a bird with a huge beak and a pouch under it heading for us.

– Run! Fly! It's coming for us! It will swallow us all! Squeaky screamed.

– It's just a pelican, said Shorty.

– Well, really... I'm not *just* a pelican, spoke the pelican. Hello, thank you for waiting. What a queer bunch you are!

– We're nightcreatures! frowned McPeck.

The pelican started laughing and his laughter echoed in his beak:

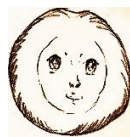
– Not so loud, or you'll scare me, little one! I'm Munch! How do you do! Thank you for letting me fly with you. I really hate flying alone at night, but I have to be at The Lake by morning: I'm meeting someone there.

– Did we let him come with us? Wilfred II whispered.

– Did he even ask? He didn't give us a chance to say no. This is a sneaky one, we'd better watch out for him, Wilfred III whispered back.

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- What lake? Wilfred I asked.
- *The* Lake. Haven't you heard of it? It's *the* place to be at this time of the year. All the pelicans and geese are gathering there.
- Are you meeting a pelican there?
- No, a goose. We've never really met, but we've been communicating through calls. We've also exchanged messages through migrating birds. It's very exciting, really. I do hope it turns out better than it did last time.
- What happened last time?
- I flew all the way to the North Sea to meet a swan. But she turned out to be a crow. And she had a bad sense of humour, too.
- You've been to the North Sea?
- Well, yes, obviously. I told you. Now, don't rub it in.
- Do you know how to get there?
- Of course. Is that where you're going?
- Yes, but we don't know which way to go. We just know we should follow the Danube.
- Yes, that's the long way. Follow the Danube right into the Black Forest. Then you should cross the mountains and follow the Rhine. It goes right into the North Sea.
- We'd really like to go to the North.
- Ah, I see. Then you should turn right on the second river. It leads to Thüringer Wald. I know. I once communicated with a woodpecker who lived there... Talk about mistakes. And there you'll have to cross the mountains again, and follow the river. Then follow the coastline to Denmark.
- Is that where Vikings live?
- Yeah, sure. How should I know? If they're not birds, they don't interest me. After that, if you want to go even further North, you'll have to cross all the little islands. Then you'll get to Sweden.
- Do Vikings live there, too?
- Why do you keep asking me? If they don't chirp or quack, I don't really care.
- So this is the way we should go? Wilfred I showed him on the map.
- Yes, exactly. Could I ask you for a favour? I once knew a nightingale who lived in the Black Forest. When you pass through there, could you tell her Munch still thinks of her?
- Of course.
- I'm quite a ladies' man, you know, if I do say so myself.
- You belong to a lady? McPeck asked.





Munch laughed then answered:

– It's the other way round, really.

– Really? Attila asked.

– Yes, *really*.

– Then how is it that you're the one flying to meet her in the middle of the night?

– Well... I... Why should I explain myself to you?

– No reason. I'm just saying that you wouldn't go all that way if you were just a ladies' man.

– I have a feeling about this one.

– And you didn't have it about the last one?

– I felt something about the last one, too, but that turned out to be just my stomach. I was hungry. No, this one's different. She's seen the world. Her name is Gaga.

Attila smiled.

– What's hanging underneath your beak? Squeaky asked.

– My fish pouch. It's where I keep fish when I go on long journeys.

– Is it full?

– No. Ever since I started talking to Gaga, I have forgotten everything about hunger and eating.

– When did you start talking to her?

– Yesterday morning.

We had been flying for most of the night. As we got closer and closer to the lake, a buzzing noise could be heard: geese and pelicans, all talking.

– We're almost there. Do you hear that? This is the life! Out all night, mixing, mingling, Munch said as he flew ahead.

– Munch, wait! One second! Can you hear us?

– Depends! Tell me what it is you want, and I'll tell you if I can hear you! Munch yelled back.

– Do you think we could spend the day here, too?

– Yeah, sure, of course, of course. Come on. You can even meet Gaga. Come on!

We landed on the shore, the lake was full of birds.

– Stay here, have some fish. I'm going to find Gaga!

Munch went off, gliding over the water, making his way among the noisy birds.

– This must be a very popular resort. Just look at all these birds, said Theo.

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–I didn't know it before, but I know it now: I don't like crowds! von Gulp said.
Munch was back:

–I can't find her anywhere. Do you think she could have flown off without telling me? he looked at us pleading for an answer.

We all shook our heads.

He sat in the water and dropped his beak. He then ducked in and brought out some fish. Some he swallowed, some he threw our way:

–Here, have some fish! I'm going to drown my sorrow in fish...

He went on throwing fish until one fish hit someone, a goose.

–Oh, dear, who threw that? she asked in a loud voice, and with a terrible lisp.
Why did you throw the fish at me? she asked Munch.

–Hey, where's all the water coming from? Is it raining? Munch asked.

–How rude you are! Such an insensitive pelican!

–Oh, so you were raining... Munch mumbled. And what is your name, lovely spitting creature?

–Gaga is my name.

–Good thing it doesn't have any S's... Gaga you said? Really? You're Gaga? he asked in astonishment.

–Yessss!

–All right, all right! Don't get all worked up.

–Who are you?

Munch answered something no one could make out.

–I'm sorry, I didn't catch that, the goose said.

–That's all right, you won't be calling me very much.

–Well..., Gaga lifted her tail and straddled off.

–Well, friends, it looks like I'll be coming with you to say hello to my nightingale in the Black Forest.

–If that's what it means to be a ladies' man, I don't see why you are so proud of your reputation! McPeck told him. You're mean!

–I didn't mean it in a bad way... Munch answered.

–What about the feeling you had? Attila asked.

–I must have been hungry again.

–Did he ask if he could come with us? Wilfred II whispered to Wilfred III.

–No, of course not. I told you he was sneaky.

–And I was thinking I had memory problems and couldn't remember his asking. I should have remembered if he had asked, though, because of... the





satisfaction of telling him NO.

– What are you whispering back there? Munch asked.

– Just how glad we are that you're coming with us.

– Yeah, yeah, sure, whatever. Don't mention it.

– Is he serious? Wilfred II whispered to Wilfred III.

– Listen, Munch told Wilfred II, you look like something's bothering you. You seem upset. I just want you to know I'm here.

– Oh, believe me, I *know*.

– Do you want to talk about it? I'm sure it would make you feel better.

– I doubt it.

– I always talk about my problems.

– I've noticed.

– So, what do you say? When do we leave?

– Tonight. We'll rest here for the day, Wilfred II answered, and then whispered to his brother: Did you hear that? He said "we". He said we!

– Shh, not so loud! Did you see how quickly he noticed we were talking about him? I don't like him, Wilfred III whispered back.

– Do you always fly at night? It's a pity, really. All the nice geese sleep at night, Munch said.

– We're nightcreatures, McPeck screamed.

– Yes, yes, you keep saying that. Well, all right, tonight it is. I'm going to look around a bit, see if anything catches my eye, if you know what I mean. I'll meet you here tonight.

And Munch vanished, leaving us alone. It was morning already.

– What do we do? Perhaps we should fly off now? Wilfred II asked.

– Nonsense, we wouldn't get very far, and he'd catch up with us. He knows where we're going, Wilfred I answered.

– Maybe we can tell him we've decided to stay here, and he'll have to go on his own, Wilfred III suggested.

– And then, suppose we met in the Black Forest, Theo suggested.

– This is quite a predicament we've got ourselves in, Shorty said.

– We? *We* didn't do anything. It was *him*. All him! Wilfred II said.

– Yes, it's a messy situation. And look at all these birds... I really hate crowds, von Gulp said.

– Suppose we left earlier tonight, McPeck said.

– That is a splendid idea! We'll be well rested, we'll fly fast, I'll carry you and

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Squeaky, and he won't be able to catch up! We'll be crossing the North Sea before you know it, Attila said.

— Then we should rest now. We have a long night ahead, Wilfred I said.





The day went by very fast, and as soon as the sun began to set, me and Mr Whiskers woke everyone up.

– It isn't even dark yet, mummy! No, I'll sleep a little longer, and then I'll do my homework, Wilfred I spoke in his sleep.

– Come on, get up! Arithmetics was nothing compared to that obnoxious pelican! Wilfred IV shook him.

Soon enough we were all set. We took off, flying faster than ever. The lake disappeared behind us in no time. It got dark.

– Do you suppose he's waiting for us? Theo asked.

– No, I think he has already found another group of friendly birds to irritate, Wilfred III answered.

– What if he is?

– What?

– Waiting...

– How long can he wait? He has got to get tired of just waiting at some point.

– Still...

– What do you suggest?

– Theo is right. Perhaps we can go back a little and see what he's doing, Attila said.

– There will be no getting away from him if he sees us, Wilfred I warned.

– He won't see us, we'll hide, Attila answered.

Back we went. When we reached the lake, we flew from tree to tree until we reached the spot where we were supposed to meet Munch.

– Look, he's there, all alone.

– What is he doing?

– Just sitting.

Another pelican walked up to Munch:

– Hey, what are you doing here all by yourself? Come join the party.

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– Oh, no, I can't. I'm waiting for some friends, we're leaving on a trip. I'm afraid they might come back and not find me here and think I went away.

– Very well, suit yourself, the other pelican walked away.

– Did you hear that? Theo asked.

– Damn him! Damn him! I knew that if we came back there would be no leaving without him! Damn him! Wilfred II mumbled.

– Watch your beak, Wilfred II, Wilfred I turned to him.

– Well, let's go get the con artist, Wilfred III said.

We quietly landed behind Munch. He was looking all around, searching the sky.

– Well, are you ready to go? Attila asked.

– Oh, you're still here! I'm ready! I'm ready. Let's go! I thought you'd left.

– We... we just flew around a bit, to see the surroundings.

– Of course, of course. I know you wouldn't leave without me, Munch patted Attila on the back with his wing.

Attila frowned.

– I'm too much fun to be around, right? Right? Aren't I?

– Oh, tons! Attila answered.

– Let's go! Come on, everybody! I'm here! We can go now! Follow me! Munch called out.

– What have we done? I don't even have anyone to blame this time. I myself have agreed to it, Wilfred II mumbled.

Munch flew quietly for a little while. A very short while.

– There's a city ahead, you know, he said.

– Yes, we know. Limes Romanum. It says here on the map, Wilfred I answered.

– What does it say about birds?

– It doesn't say anything about birds. This map was drawn by humans, Romans to be more precise.

– What? It doesn't say anything about birds? How can you even use that map? It must be bad.

– It's a little out of date, but we're filling in the missing cities. It will be the only up to date map. We'll publish it in the Owls' Encyclopaedia.

– Why the Owls' Encyclopaedia? Why not the Pelicans'?

– Because the Owls' is the most prestigious.

– Says who?

– Have you read it?





—No.
 —Then how do you know it isn't?
 —This is discrimination!
 —Let's not argue. We've already settled the matter and agreed upon it.
 —But I wasn't here then.
 —Yes... those were the times, Wilfred II whispered.
 —I'm an owl, my brothers are owls, we're the ones working on it, it's coming out in the Owls' Encyclopaedia.

—Do what you want, but this is not democratic.
 Munch was quiet again. Soon enough we could see the city lights. It was a big city, and up high on the hill we could see a castle.

—Well, it's Vienna after this. In Vienna we might come across Celts and Germans, besides Romans, Wilfred I said.

—Say something, look, he's upset, Attila whispered to Wilfred I.
 —So, Munch, what do you know about Vienna?
 —Nothing.

It was quiet again. We flew over the city and left it behind us. The Danube was still as wide as always.

Squeaky flew closer to Munch:

—Do you have many friends?
 —Oh, yes, lots and lots.
 —Really? I didn't have any... Do you play games with them?
 —Sure, sure.
 —What kind of games?

—Well, we once played a game where they tied a blindfold around my eyes and they gave me a piece of salami to hold onto, and took me into the city. When they said I could take off the blindfold, I saw a pack of dogs coming for me. You should have seen me running then! I even forgot I could fly! Finally I threw away the salami and the dogs stopped, but one of them tried to bite my tail. He only got feathers, but now I have a bald spot here. See? and Munch showed us his behind.

—Was it fun?
 —Well... they seemed to think so... They laughed and laughed.
 —What did your parents say about leaving like that, in the middle of the night?
 Wilfred I asked.

—Oh, I live on my own, I don't have parents.
 —Have you always been on your own?

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—No, when I hatched, my grandfather took me in, took care of me until I was old enough to fly. Then he said I could take care of myself just fine, and threw me out so he could get on with his life.

—Why don't you have parents?

—I don't know, I guess I was just born without parents.

—Maybe they're here, but you can't see them, just like my daddy, McPeck said.

—How's that?

—When my daddy suddenly disappeared, my mummy said he didn't go anywhere, he was right there with us, we just couldn't see him any more. Maybe your parents are invisible, too. I guess this can be a parent thing.

—You think so?

—Yes, so maybe they've been with you all along, ever since you hatched.

—Yeah... maybe... But still, I wish they had at least once sent me a birthday card. It would have been nice. Maybe a gift, too. Like the little wooden coloured fish all the other pelicans had when I was little. They used to throw it in the water and dive for it. It was fun. I had a friend once who let me play with his fish. We used to take turns diving for it.

—What happened to him?

—He went for a summer to the Delta, met a bird there, fell in love, got married. They've been hatching eggs ever since.

—The Danube Delta? Shorty asked

—Yes, what other Delta do you know?

—I have a friend there, too, an opera singer.

—Really? What do you know, the world is full of pelicans.

—Do you keep in touch?

—Not so much any more. He can't write a single line without saying "my wife-this" and "my wife-that". It's sad to see them when they fall in love. I feel sorry for him. Every night going to the same nest, having a dozen little pelicans playing around, having someone to whisper to when the night grows cold, feeling someone there when a nightmare wakes him up, feeling a warm beak over his wing every morning... Poor thing...

—Do you keep in touch with your grandfather? McPeck asked.

—I wrote him a letter once, but he sent me my letter back and wrote on the envelope: I don't live here any more, I'm not receiving any of your letters.

—Do you live all by yourself?

—Yeah, I'm a big pelican.

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- Where do you live?
- On a little lake, a bit like the one we just left.
- Do friends come over to visit you?
- Sure, every day. The day before yesterday a flight of wild ducks came: they landed on the lake, fished, then left.
- Wild ducks? Did you see my mummy? McPeck asked.
- I don't know. Describe her.
- Well, she has a beak, two wings, a tail, a little like me.
- You don't say, no kidding. In that case I may have seen her.
- What did she say? Was she worried?
- Nah, no, not at all.
- Attila flew close to Munch and frowned at him.
- I mean, I'm sure she knows you're in good company.
- Good. I wouldn't want her to worry. I'll write to her soon. I'm just not very sure where she's going.
- Have you been on many adventures? Squeaky asked.
- Oh, yeah, sure.
- Are you brave?
- Me? Of course. I even met a bear once.
- Really? What did he look like?
- I don't know, I hid up in the tree.
- Did you talk to him?
- If I had talked to him, hiding wouldn't have had much of a point any more, would it? Duh!
- Maybe he was just looking for a friend.
- Yeah, that or a late night snack. Have you had many adventures? Munch asked us.
- A few, some, nothing worth mentioning, Wilfred I smiled, and everyone else smiled, too.
- Well, I have. I once took a balloon from a little boy.
- Why?
- Because I liked it. It was red.
- Did you snatch it from him?
- No! What kind of a bird do you think I am?
- Wilfred III turned to Wilfred II and whispered:
- Don't answer that.





– The kid let the balloon go and it got stuck in the tree. I waited for him and his mother to leave and I went and got it. Balloons are such fun. And they make great friends, too! We spent the whole day together, I showed him all the sights. Then in the evening I took him home. I left him on a branch next to the little boy's window. The little boy found him in no time. He was really happy, too. But he didn't take good care of the balloon, and every day I watched him get smaller and smaller, until he almost vanished. I guess he just wasn't getting enough attention.

– What other friends did you have?

– Well, there was a bottle once, the river threw her into my lake. And an old rubber boot. And a willow tree, and an old boat with a hole in it.

– Where are they now?

– The bottle, some of my pelican friends asked to borrow her, they said they wanted to show her around. I agreed and they took her high up so she could get a good view of the lake and the river, but then an accident happened and they dropped her right over a rock... I tried to put all the pieces together again, but she just wasn't the same any more. After this, I decided it would be best if I took my rubber boot friend somewhere safe... but I still can't remember where exactly I put him. One day, when I was away, some pelicans wanted to learn how to sail, and they took the boat out. It's still there, at the bottom of the lake. The willow tree is all right, but he's so very quiet. I think something is upsetting him, he's always in such a low mood.

– Are you looking forward to meeting the nightingale?

– The what? Oh, yeah, sure, of course. Can't wait. So why exactly are you going to the North?

– So Vic can grow into a chestnut tree.

– But that will take a while, Munch said.

– We're in no hurry.

No one spoke for a little while. The cold night air echoed the sounds the river made while flowing.

– Vienna is the city of music, you know, Shorty said. When we get there, we must stop to see the concert-hall.

– Of course we will. But they only have concerts in the evening.

– I know, but I think it will be worth the wait. A cousin of mine delivered a baby to a pigeon in Vienna once, right on New Year's day. And on that day they have a beautiful concert, to celebrate the New Year. The music was so nice that she had to stop and listen. Needless to say, she was late in taking the baby, the family who was waiting for her got very worried and called the Stork Council. She was kept under





observation for a while after that. Then she quit, married a condor, and moved to South America.

Suddenly clouds covered the sky, and a very cold wind started blowing.

— It looks like we're going to have a storm. Let's find shelter, Wilfred I said.

There were trees on both sides of the river, and soon enough we found the perfect old tree, with a huge hole for us to hide in.

— You go in first, Shorty. Watch your head.

We all fit in quite nicely. Soon the rain started pouring. Every once in a while the sky lit up from lightning, and then a loud thunder followed.

— Let's hope it stops by morning.

— It must, so we can get something to eat, said Squeaky.

— Don't worry: even if it doesn't, I'll go get us some fish. I'm used to the water, said Munch.

Hardly had he finished talking when there was another loud thunder. Munch jumped up and landed with his head right under Attila's wing:

— It's thunder I don't like so much.

It rained for the rest of the night. Small drops of rain were still falling in the morning. When we got up, Munch had already filled our tree-hole with fish.

— Good morning everyone! I hope you all slept well. I know *you* did, Squeaky, in spite of all my efforts to turn you on your side. You snored and snored away.

— I'm sorry, I didn't do it on purpose.

— It's quite all right. I got used to it a little while before the sun rose. You know, we're very close to the city, really. I can already see rooftops.

— That's good. As soon as the rain abates, we'll go take a look, and tonight we'll listen to a concert, said Theo.

— What's a concert? asked Munch.

— Have you ever heard an orchestra playing?

— No.

— That's a concert.

— What's an orchestra?

— A group of people who make lovely music.

— You mean we're making such a big fuss over listening to people get noisy?

— No, over music. You'll see.

— I'm sure I will. I can't decide anything for myself any more.

— Don't you want to come with us?

— Sure I do. What did I say? Did you hear me complaining? You make such a

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big deal out of a little nonsense. So when's the concert?

It rained for most of the day, and then it stopped a little before sundown, so we could see the sunset clearly. In the clear evening air, we set out.

— So where's the concert? Munch asked.

— If we're here, I think we should go see an Opera, said Shorty.

— If we're here, what we really should see is the Zoo. A friend of mine told me they had some very exotic birds there, Munch said.

— And how did he know?

— He spent some time there. But they didn't keep him for long, he wasn't that special, he ate a lot, and what really got to them was that he spat fish heads at the children.

— That was rather mean.

— He was just sharing his meal with them. What do you say? Can we go to the Zoo? Can we?

— Suppose someone caught us.

— Who'll be there at night? Come on! Be brave! What do you say?

— Well, all right. After the Opera.

— Oh, good! Let's hurry, come on, to the Opera! How do we find it?

— We must listen and find out where the music comes from.

We flew closer and closer to the city, passing over lights, and houses, and people.

— Look how many castles!

— And look, a horse! Squeaky called out.

— And a swan! Munch screamed. Here I come!

— No, you don't! Attila pecked at him. You fly with us, you stay with us!

Munch looked at him and hesitated a bit, but then he said:

— All right, yeah, I'm flying with you, I'm staying with you. Then he smiled.

Suddenly, a car honked loudly down below.

— Hey, did you hear that? The Opera! Munch said.

— No, that's not it. We're looking for music.

So we flew a little further and, since we couldn't hear any music, we stopped to rest on a roof.

— This just can't be. This is a city of music. It must have an Opera House, Shorty sighed.

— Don't worry, I'm sure we'll find it, McPeck tried to comfort her. Maybe we just have to listen harder.





– Listen to what? What do you think you're going to listen to? There's nothing to listen to and nothing to see! an angry swallow walked right between us, with his long split black tail touching the roof, and his wings behind his back. With no ballerina, there can be no ballet. Nothing!

– Excuse me, but who are you? Wilfred I asked.

– Who am I? *Who* am I? You offend me, Sir! Why, I am Hans Konzert, I'm the Music Meister, the director, the choreographer. I *am* the Opera. Which isn't much now...

– I do apologize. We're not from around here, you see.

– Ooooh... savages, eigh? Wild birds?

– No, nightcreatures, McPeck said.

– Aha. Well, that would be your business and no concern of mine. Be what you like.

– Pardon me, but what happened? Theo asked.

– What happened? A disaster! A catastrophe! A calamity! My ballerina eloped! And with whom? With the stage cleaner. With a crow!

– Was she a swan? I've heard swans do that, Munch said.

– Well, no more swans in my Opera!

– How would you feel about a stork? Munch said and pushed Shorty forward.

– Can you dance? the Music Meister asked Shorty.

– All my life I've been dreaming of becoming a ballerina.

– Good enough! Get ready! There is a show in 30 minutes! Come on, places everyone, we've got our ballerina!

In less than a second the roof top was full of birds, elegant pigeons sitting up front, sparrows sitting further back, even a few crows here and there.

Down below people were going into the building, all dressed up, everyone laughing and talking loudly.

– I'll go prepare, I'm so nervous, Shorty said and off she went to the centre of the roof.

– We should get her something, before the show starts.

– Yes, but what?

– I know, a rose!

– A rose? No, she can't eat that, it has thorns. Let's get her a strudel! Squeaky said.

– Yes, I saw a pastry shop just down the street. I'll go, Theo said. Off he went, and came back with strudels for everyone.





– Did anyone see you?
 – Only the shopkeeper.
 – What did she say?
 – That if I returned she'd give me more than I could carry. I kindly refused. I have to watch my figure.

– Shh! Shh! The music is starting.

At first slower, then faster and louder, and the roof vibrated. The Music Meister signalled Shorty to go, and off she went, one pirouette after the next. Behind her a few pigeons danced. On and on she went, flying at times, slowly lifting herself off the roof, then slowly landing again. And then, just as the moon was high, the music stopped, hands clapping could be heard from below. Up above everyone went silent, as if the music was still going on. And then, when the people started leaving, all the birds started flapping their wings. Shorty bowed. Squeaky flew up to her and gave her the strudel.

– Oh, you really shouldn't have!

– It was our pleasure, and we've already had one, too.

Then the birds all left, a few at a time.

– Beautiful, graceful! the Music Meister came towards Shorty. You'll be our ballerina from now on!

– Really? I... I..., and then Shorty turned to us. Her eyes met Theo's and Theo nodded.

– If I say yes, that means I can't come with you any more.

– But going to the North isn't your dream. This is.

– Well, agreed then? Come on, I have the perfect lodging for you, right over the Schönnbrunn Castle.

– Go on, the owls whispered.

Everyone waved as we watched her disappear into the night.

– Come on, time to go to the Zoo! Munch said.

– Do you know where it is?

– I'll find out, and down he went to a horse whose carriage was parked in front of the Opera.

– Hello, good evening!

The horse didn't answer.

– Good evening! What, are you deaf or something?

The horse looked at him:

– If I were deaf, your screaming so loudly would prove to be of very little help.

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No, I simply don't talk to pelicans.

- Why not?
- It's a matter of principle.
- Well, I don't want to talk to you, I'd just like to know where the Zoo is.
- Telling you would mean talking to you, and I can't do that.
- Don't tell me, tell that tree.
- It didn't ask.
- Pretend it did.
- I don't just offer information. Time is money.
- What about a strudel?
- What about it?
- I mean, what if I were to give you a strudel, and in exchange you'd tell me.
- What would I do with a strudel?
- Eat it?
- I don't eat strudels, I prefer hay.
- Strudels are very good. Delicious. Sweet. They're made with apples.
- Apples? Really?
- Yes. What do you say?
- I still can't tell you. My principles are very important to me. But I could take you there.

- Me and my friends?
- Sure, get into the carriage!

Munch gave his strudel to the horse, and we all got in. The horse started going faster and faster. We could hear a man running behind us, yelling:

– *"Hey! Stop! Come back with my carriage! Stop!"*

A man in a uniform ran up to him:

- *"What happened, Sir?"*
- *"My horse and carriage have been stolen! From right under my nose!"*
- *"Did you see who took them?"*
- *"I saw them all right, all ten of them."*
- *"Ten, Sir? All in the carriage?"*
- *"Yes, four owls, an eagle, a raven, a seagull, a bat, a duckling and a pelican."*
- *"Oh, I see. Did they leave a note? Asking for ransom for the horse, perhaps?"*
- *"Do you think I'm dense or something? I'm telling you what I saw!"*
- *"Right. Well, perhaps you should get home and have a good night's sleep. I won't even give you a fine for being so loud."*





– “Give me a fine? My horse and carriage got stolen!”

– “If you insist, come down to the station with me and you can file a complaint against all the birds you can think of. Well? Does that make you happy?”

The carriage was quite comfortable, and seeing the world from so close to the ground was something very new to us.

– Won’t that man mind you’re giving us a lift? Attila asked.

– No, I’m surprised to see he even noticed me leaving. We spend all day together, every day, and he doesn’t even say Good morning, or Good night. By the way, the strudel was very good indeed. Tell the pelican I said thank you.

– Why don’t you tell him yourself?

– I couldn’t.

– You’re welcome, Munch answered.

McPeck moved a little closer to Munch:

– Here, have some of mine, it was too much for me.

– Thank you, Munch smiled and swallowed the piece.

– Here, you can have some of mine, too, von Gulp handed a piece of strudel to Munch.

– Really? Thank you, and he swallowed the second piece, too.

– Here... I also have a piece, Wilfred II mumbled.

– Thank you, but I’m full, I’ve had enough.

Munch sat back with his belly forward and a big smile across his beak.

– Suit yourself. Are you sure?

– Yes, thank you.

– All right, and Wilfred II ate it.

Munch smiled all the way, looking around him, to the right and to the left.

– Going to the Zoo makes you this happy? Wilfred I asked.

Munch just looked at him and smiled some more, then looked around at us again.

– Never mind, he’s probably thinking about all the birds he’s going to offend there, Wilfred III told Wilfred I.

Munch was still smiling.

– Vienna Zoo! Final stop! the horse called out.

We all got off.

– Will you be all right? Getting back alone, I mean, Wilfred I asked.

– Oh, sure. But I won’t go back just yet. I think I’ll stop to graze a little. I might even go to say ‘hello’ to a few friends. Goodbye now! Say goodbye to the pelican for





me!

– Goodbye, Munch answered.

We flew over the gate and landed on an alley, in-between cages:

– Hey, look! Birds! a rough voice spoke.

– If I weren't so well fed, I might actually care, another voice answered.

In front of the cage there was a sign: *Lions*.

– I'll talk to them, Attila stepped forward.

– Hello! If you don't mind, we're looking for birds. Do you know where we might find them?

– All over. The damn things fly and quack all day! Say, how did you get out of your cage? a big animal with a huge head got closer to the rails.

– Why, I've never been in a cage.

– Never? a second lion jumped up. Where have you lived all your life, then?

– Up in the mountains.

– Who fed you?

– I fed myself. I fished mostly.

– Oh, you poor thing. Well... I'll tell you what: we have room for you here, with us. What do you say?

– Thank you, but I'm fine, really.

– Are you sure? These people feed us three times a day, and they clean our cages, and they give us toys.

– Thank you, again, but I... I couldn't possibly leave my friends.

– How many of them?

– 11.

– Well, I'm sorry, but we can't take you all in. Perhaps you should talk to the giraffe, though. She has a really big cage. Just go a little further down. And if it's birds you're looking for, they're on the other side of the zoo.

– Thank you. Sorry for disturbing you. Good night!

– Poor things... No one to feed them, no roof over their heads. And we complain when they forget to pick the meat off the bones. How ungrateful of us..., we could hear the lions talking as we were taking off.

We flew all over the Zoo, over crocodiles and bears, tigers and leopards, foxes and wolves, and finally reached the birds. We landed in front of a sign which read: *Ostrich*.

– Hello, hello! Munch said. Peek-a-boo! he stuck his beak between the bars.

– Do you even know what an ostrich looks like?

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– Not a clue, but we'll find out soon! and Munch picked up a stick and went all around the cage, banging on the bars.

– Who's there? a huge silhouette came closer and closer.

– I'm Munch. How do you do?

– Go away! the voice said and the figure partly hid. Time out!

– What are you doing? Munch asked.

– What do you mean? the ostrich replied. I said: Time out!

– What does that mean?

– That's just what you say when you don't like a game. Time out! and then you stick your head into the sand, and no one can see you.

– What game were we playing?

– I don't know, you started it, not me.

– And even if you stick your head in the ground, I can still see the rest of you.

– Very rude of you to look! And anyway, since I can't see you, you can't prove you saw me, because if you see me, that means I can see you, too, and I don't see you.

– Because you're not looking.

– Precisely. You're finally beginning to understand.

– All I want is to meet you.

– Well, I'm not playing.

– All right. Good night, then.

And off we went to the next cage. We had hardly got very close when a loud call was heard. The sign read: *Great Hornbill*.

– What are you getting so upset for? No need to shout, Munch said.

– I wasn't shouting, I was just telling my friend up there how lovely the moon looks tonight.

Another loud call came from high up. The bird we first talked to said:

– He agrees, and then he shouted again.

– What was that for?

– I told him to look at the stars, too.

And then there was another call:

– He doesn't like the stars, just the moon.

– Nice meeting you both. Come on, let's go before I get a headache, Munch rushed off.

The next sign read: *Peacock*. Inside, a small bird was sitting in the grass.

– Hello, there. You seem rather small. What do they keep you here for?

The bird got closer to the bars.





— You think I'm small, do you? and all of a sudden he spread out his green and blue tail, and doubled his size.

— Well, you're still small. Small, but with a big tail.

— Ignorant! the peacock mumbled, and walked away holding his beak high.

— This has been interesting, we can go now, Munch said.

— Wait! Look there, at the last cage. It looks like a mountain, Attila said.

The sign read *Cinereous Vulture*.

— Hello, anyone here?

A bald head came out of a hole:

— It depends.

— What do you mean? Are you here or not?

— If I said no, would you believe me?

— What reason could you possibly have to lie? My name is Attila, I used to live on a mountain, too.

— I'm Seamus. But this isn't a mountain. They put me here a while back. I used to live on a mountain, too.

— Do you like it here?

— The food is great. I just don't feel like eating it. I miss home, I miss... Well, never mind.

— Who do you miss?

— A beautiful vulture by the name of Sheena. I write to her every week, and she writes back.

— Would you like to go home?

— How can I? If I could, I would have left here a long time ago.

— We'll try to get you out, won't we? Attila turned to us.

— Are you sure he won't have us all for dinner? Look how big he is, Munch asked.

— Why would I eat birds?

— What do vultures eat?

— Meat, cut in really small pieces. It comes in buckets.

— What did you eat at home?

— I don't remember, really. Rabbits I think. Oh, how could I... Poor things. But I won't any more. I'll turn vegetarian. Fruit is very tasty, you know. A monkey gave me some for my last birthday.

— I don't know, Attila, I don't trust him... And look, he's in a cage all on his own. All the others are in groups. He could be dangerous, Theo whispered.





— But I promised him... and think, how would you like to lead your life alone in a cage? I know that if I were in his place I would be very grateful to whomever got me out.

— He is right, we can't just leave him trapped in a cage. Being alone is no fun, von Gulp said.

— Well, all right. Hold me by my tail, and I'll get the lock to open, Mr Whiskers said, and in no time at all, the lock was open and the vulture free.

But as soon as the door to the cage opened, a horrible noise startled us, and all the lights went on, and Wilfred I dropped Mr Whiskers.

Suddenly, Seamus rushed out through the open door, straight for Mr Whiskers.

— Watch out! He's hungry! He's hungry! Munch called out. Poor Mr Whiskers!

— I'm fine, I'm fine, Mr Whiskers said. Thank you, Seamus, I would have had a very nasty fall.

— Don't mention it, glad I could be of assistance.

— *"Hey, who's there? You're trapped now, there's no way you can leave the premises, the alarm has gone off, and all the doors are locked. Come out!"* a man ran forward carrying a flash light.

We flew off over the fence, into a nearby tree and waited. Soon a car with bright red and blue lights on came, and two men stepped out:

— *"What happened?"*

— *"The vulture is gone."*

— *"And... have you seen who took him?"*

— *"Yes."*

— *"Would you like to tell us?"*

— *"Yes."*

— *"Now perhaps?"*

— *"There were more than one."*

— *"I see. How many?"*

— *"Ten."*

— *"Ten men?"*

— *"Ten birds: four owls, a seagull, a raven, an eagle, a bat, a duckling and a pelican. They must have been his friends."*

— *"Excuse me, we'll just go... report that."*

The two men took their distance and whispered to each other:

— *"Call for backup, he's probably in on the theft, too. Hurry! He might be dangerous!"*

— You're free now. Where do you come from?





—Oh, I don't remember. I was very little when they brought me here. I remember mountains.

—That's not very helpful. Here, see on the map? There are mountains everywhere, Wilfred I said.

—Did you live with your mummy? McPeck asked.

—With both my mummy and my daddy.

—Did they hunt? Squeaky asked.

—I don't remember them hunting. I think they brought home animals that were already dead.

—Did they wait for them to die, or did they give them a hand? Munch asked.

—My parents were really nice birds, they wouldn't have hurt a fly.

—Of course not. Flies are hardly what you'd consider a good meal, said Munch.

—What happened to your parents?

—I don't know. All I can remember is that I hurt my wing once when I was flying, and a man found me and brought me here.

—When did you meet Sheena?

—Here, a while back. She hadn't even hatched when they brought her. Her parents had an accident, they flew into an airplane. When she was old enough to find food on her own, they took her back to the mountains. She was quite miserable, all alone out there, searching for her meals every day.

—So what do we do now? We can't leave him, especially not now that we've got him out, said Wilfred IV. Do you want to come with us? Since you've got nowhere else to go.

—Where are you going?

—To the North.

—All together?

—Yes, we're nightcreatures, Munch said.

—And we only fly at night.

—That's fine with me.

—Won't you miss Sheena?

—When we get there, I'll find a nice bare rock, far from everyone, and then I'll call for her.

—All right then. I'm not sure how far the next city is, but here on the map it shows that many peoples inhabit this land: Lombards, Thuringians, Burgundians, Franks, Allemanni, Saxons. Let's find the river again and be on our way. Does anyone remember which way we came? This way. Or maybe that way.

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—Wait one minute, Seamus said, and flew in circles, higher and higher, until we could barely see his huge wings.

He flew over us a few times, then returned:

—Follow me!

We were soon over the river again, leaving behind a city and a friend — Shorty.

—In no time at all we'll be over the Black Forest, von Gulp told Munch. Are you happy?

—Of course I'm happy.

—Do you think about it a lot?

—Think about what?

—The meeting.

—Oh, yes, every day. It was really most fortunate I happened to be waiting for you. Most fortunate for you, I mean, of course.

—Meeting the nightingale?

—You met a nightingale? And you didn't even bother to tell me? When? What was she like?

—No, no, no. But you will soon. The nightingale in the Black Forest.

—Oh, that. Yes, of course there is a nightingale in the Black Forest.

—Have you always been called Seamus? Squeaky asked.

—No, just ever since I began to live in the cage. They used to call me Poncho.

—Why?

—Because with my head and neck so bare, it looks as if I'm wearing a poncho.

—What does Sheena call you?

—She calls me Kyte, because she thinks I look like one when I'm floating with the wind. If only she could see me now.

—Do you know many vultures?

—Only my parents and Sheena. We like to live by ourselves. It's better than living in a group. When you live with other birds, you have to ask them how they are every day, and sometimes they actually answer, and you have to listen. And you have to greet them whenever you pass them.

—Yes... terrible, Munch said.

—Didn't you get lonely in that cage, all by yourself?

—Lonely? Oh, no. The cockatoos next door were always chirping and quacking, I never had a moment's peace. No wonder I lost my appetite.

—Did you have many friends?

—Just one.





—How did you meet him?

—Oh, not a he, a she. And I never did, I imagined her.

—What was her name?

—Sheena, I've already told you about her.

—You mean Sheena doesn't exist? Attila asked.

—Of course she does. Only no one can see her.

—That's the way my daddy is, too: invisible, said McPeck.

—But you said you missed her. You can't miss someone you haven't met, Attila said.

—But we have met. When they brought her to the Zoo.

—But she didn't exist.

—A minor detail. What difference does that make?

—Where did you send the letters? Theo asked.

—I never thought that far. I just imagined writing to her and reading her letters.

—Did you look forward to getting letters from her?

—Of course.

—Why? If you imagined them, you already knew what was in them.

—Not really, I'm very spontaneous, you know.

—Love is blind, indeed. So what if she doesn't exist! If they're in love, they can't help it, Munch said. I do look forward to meeting her, he laughed a little.

—I'm sure you'll like her, she's lots of fun.

—So now we've got a nut, too, Wilfred II whispered to Wilfred III.

—Shhh, don't be mean. She could be very nice. After all, you wouldn't know, Wilfred III answered.

—Flying like this feels so nice. I can stretch and stretch my wings, and—, Seamus said and, while pulling back his wing, he hit Theo over the head. Oh, so sorry. I didn't mean that. Are you all right?

—Fine, fine, don't worry, Theo said while flying further away from him.

—Do you think he did that on purpose? Wilfred II whispered to Wilfred III.

—I don't know, but we'd better keep an eye on him.

—Do you fly like this all night, every night? Seamus asked.

—Yes, we try.

—This is such fun. We could fly and fly like this for years!

—We hope to reach the North a little sooner, Wilfred I answered.

—What's that? On the bank. A rabbit! A cute little rabbit! Seamus said and flew straight for the rabbit.





—Oh, Attila, what have we done? We've unleashed a beast! Wilfred I called out. Leave the rabbit alone! You hear me? Get away!

—If you hurt that rabbit, I'll... I'll... tell your mummy! I will! Wilfred II screamed.

Seamus landed over the rabbit, with his huge wings open. By the time we got to him, the rabbit was stiff with fear, and shaking. Seamus covered him with his wings.

—No wonder they didn't need to hunt. All they had to do was fly over them once and they dropped dead voluntarily, Wilfred II whispered.

—What are you doing? Attila asked.

—I'm keeping him warm. See? He's shaking.

—Because you've scared him out of his wits. He's not cold, Theo answered.

—You're afraid of me? Seamus asked the rabbit.

The rabbit nodded quickly.

—Oh, I'm truly sorry, I only wanted to make your acquaintance. I've never seen a real rabbit before.

—I thought you said you used to eat them, von Gulp said.

—That's what the Zoo keeper tells the children when they come to visit. I don't really remember. I don't even remember my parents.

—It's not nice to lie, Wilfred IV told him.

—I haven't lied to you.

—He does have a point. We never really asked him if his friend was real or if he actually ate rabbits, Theo agreed.

—Well, you can let the rabbit go now, Attila said.

—Of course. Go, rabbit. I'm truly sorry for the inconvenience.

The rabbit ran off so fast that we didn't even have a chance to say goodbye. We took off again. This time we were all rather quiet. Seamus was flying behind us, a little higher than us, so every once in a while he'd block the moonlight like a huge dark cloud. He didn't say anything.

—I think he's upset, Attila said.

—If he's upset, imagine how the rabbit must be feeling, Munch answered.

—He seems like a nice fellow. It's just that he's lived alone in a cage all his life, Theo said.

—So, Seamus, old chap, what's bothering you? Wilfred IV asked him. You seem upset.

—Oh, no, I've just got another letter from Sheena.

—No kidding! What does she say? Read it to us, Munch said.

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Attila frowned at him.

— Listen:

Dear Seamus,

I'm happy to hear you are well and finally out of that dreadful cage. I'm glad you've found such a nice group of friends, and of course I look forward to meeting them. I've finally finished building my nest up on the highest rock, and it's beginning to feel a little like home. I miss you, too, and look forward to getting more letters from you, though with the strong wind up here, I may not be receiving all of them.

Love,

Sheena

— How does she know about us? von Gulp asked.

— I wrote her as soon as we left.

Wilfred I just sighed, while Wilfred II whispered to Wilfred III:

— This is getting very interesting.

— I do hope she receives my letters.

McPeck flew up to Attila and asked him in a really low voice:

— I'm a little bit confused: if she's invisible, how can she write letters?

— She writes invisible letters, Attila answered.

McPeck thought about it really hard, and the effort he was making to understand was quite visible.

— And she's not really invisible. She never existed for anyone else than Seamus.

He made her up, Attila told him.

— So if he stops thinking about her, she won't exist any more?

— More or less.

— That's sad.

— Not really, because if he begins to think less about her, he'll have more time to enjoy the things around him, and then he might actually meet a really nice vulture.

— It's still sad. Being forgotten is always sad.

The rest of the night passed quite quickly and quietly. Before morning we were flying over a city again.

— Where are we?

— I'm not sure. It's not on the map. We should find a place to stay, though. It will soon be day, Wilfred I said.

— Look there, those are vineyards. We could stay there, we could eat grapes,

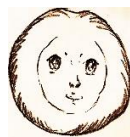
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too, Theo suggested, and down we flew and landed in an aisle between the vines. Before we leave, we must remember to get the name of this city, but let's rest now. We'll think about that in the evening.





The day passed quickly and, when it was getting dark again, we were all ready for our meal. The grapes were truly delicious, very sweet. The town was lying before us, not very big, with narrow winding streets.

—Now, let's go find out the name, and then we can be on our way again, Wilfred I said.

We all headed for the town.

—Wait a second... there's something missing, Theo said.

—What?

—I don't know... Is everyone here?

—Well, I don't know about the others, but I am, Munch announced.

—Let's see: von Gulp, Squeaky, McPeck... Seamus!

—You're right!

—Seamus, Seamus! Attila started calling out.

—Where could he be? You don't suppose that what I said upset him, do you?

Wilfred II asked.

—No, I'm sure there is a perfectly logical explanation for this, Wilfred I replied.

—Well... that I'm not so sure of, but as long as I didn't hurt his feelings, I'm content.

—I found him! Down there! Wilfred IV called out, and we all landed next to him.

—What's wrong Seamus? Why are you here?

—I'm just writing Sheena a letter. I came here to get a better view of the town, so I could describe it to her.

—Told you! So much for the explanation, Wilfred II told Wilfred I.

—Well, come on. Time to go now.

—I can't.

—What do you mean you can't? Are you ill? von Gulp asked.

—I'm waiting for her letter. I can't leave just yet, I might miss it.

—I'm sure she'll know where to send it, Wilfred I said.

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– I'm not leaving until I get her letter.
 – Suit yourself, Wilfred II said, and, just as he was getting ready to fly off, Wilfred I grabbed the feathers of his tail with his beak.
 – You're still not too old for me to pluck you clean! Wilfred I told him.
 – I was just going to go, fly around, find out the name of the town, until Seamus gets his letter.

– Really?
 – Of course.
 – Very well, go then, but take Wilfred III and Wilfred IV with you.
 – Can I go, too? Squeaky asked.
 – Sure. But don't take too long.
 – Can we come, too? We'd love to see the town, Mr Whiskers said.
 And round Wilfred II's neck we went. We flew over it again and again, but nothing caught our eye. There were houses of all shapes and sizes, but no sign.
 – Could this city have no name? Wilfred II asked.
 – No, it must have a name. But perhaps the people keep it a secret, Wilfred III answered.

– Why?
 – Maybe they don't like visitors, they don't want their city to get too crowded.
 – Now how does that stop visitors from coming?
 – It's simple. Visitors need to know the name of the place they're going to. If they don't know it, they can't ask for directions, and they can't say they're there. For instance, when we used to meet Peter the Robin, we would tell him to meet us at the Old Maple Tree. Suppose that tree didn't have a name. We couldn't have told him where to come, and we wouldn't have met.

– Well, if the name of this town is a secret, then it's a very well kept one. Come on, let's go back.

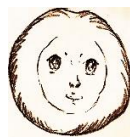
As we turned around and headed back for the hill where the others were waiting, we noticed a huge building, very close to the vineyards.

– What's that? Wilfred IV asked. Let's see, maybe that's where they're keeping the town's name.

The building was dark and empty. There was one open window to the side, and it led to an even darker hallway.

– Are you sure we ought to go in? It's dark, Squeaky said.
 – Yes, it is dark. This is the place to hide a name, Wilfred IV answered.
 – If they've gone to this much trouble to hide it, they might be guarding it, as





well, Squeaky said.

– Well, we'll see, won't we? Wilfred IV said and flew inside.

We all followed. The long hallway led to a large room full of bottles, all nicely placed on shelves, one on top of the other.

– Do you suppose they have more than one name hidden here? Wilfred III asked.

– If the name is here, it should be in a bottle. Let's look.

Wilfred IV flew over to a shelf, pulled a bottle out, then placed it on the floor.

– I can't see much, there is something inside.

– Let me check, Squeaky said, as he picked up the bottle with his two little hands, and pulled the cork.

He sniffed it carefully:

– It's a liquid.

He tasted it then:

– And it's sweet.

He drank a little.

– I haven't found anything yet.

– Well... keep going. It might be at the bottom.

Squeaky drank the whole bottle, then let it fall. The sound of the bottle hitting the floor startled someone.

– *"Who's there?"*

Soon, the lights were all on.

– Look, it's on the bottle. Quickly write it down: *Weingut Stadt Krems 1850*. Let's go! Come on, Squeaky, come on!

– Hic! Squeaky was lying flat on the floor, with his tummy round like a ball. Hic!

Wilfred IV picked him up, and we flew right by the man standing. Someone else was coming:

– *"What happened?"*

– *"Someone broke in and drank a bottle of the collection wine. The 1850 harvest."*

– *"Oh, no. That was going to be auctioned tomorrow! Who did this?"*

– *"Three owls and a bat. Personally, I think the bat drank it."*

– *"Oh, really! Have you no shame? What a tale to tell. And at your age. Couldn't you have at least chosen a less expensive bottle?"*

– *"I'm telling you the truth."*

– *"After drinking a bottle of wine that strong, I'm sure that seems like the truth to you."*

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Come on, help me pour some wine from this harvest into the bottle. Let's hope no one notices."

We soon reached the others:

- We've got it: Weingut Stadt Krems 1850.
- Good job! What's wrong with Squeaky?
- Poor chap, he drank the liquid they hid the name in. He's drunk again.
- They hid the name? Perhaps there is a war going, on and they didn't want the enemy to find it and steal it, Wilfred I said.
- Has the letter arrived yet? Wilfred II asked.
- No... not yet.
- It must be the strong winds she talked about, Seamus explained.
- Hey! Look what I've just received! Attila said.
- What? What? McPeck asked, and tried to look at something Attila was hiding between his wings.
- Well, you can't see it, but I'll read it to you. It's for you, Seamus.
- For me? Really?
- Yes.

Dear Seamus,

What you described sounds lovely. I can already imagine the way it all looks in the setting sun. I'm glad to see your journey is taking you to such interesting places. I, too, am going to visit a friend. I'll be gone for a few weeks..."

- Weeks? She wrote weeks?
- No, sorry, *days, a few days. So don't be alarmed if I don't answer your letters quickly. Have a safe flight. Love, Sheena.*

- Oh, yes, that sounds just like her, Seamus smiled.
- Well, can we go now? Wilfred II asked.
- Wait, I have to write back.

He closed his eyes and mumbled a little:

- There, all done. We can go now.
- Off we go then, to Lentia, Wilfred I said.

The evening air is frosty. We can feel we are quite high up in the mountains. The river is still wide, but flowing a little faster. The night is quiet.

- I don't understand, McPeck told Attila. How could you see an invisible letter?





- You see, we're all playing a game, really.
 - We are?
 - Yes. A pretend game. Seamus pretends Sheena exists, so we're going to pretend, too.
 - For how long?
 - Until he stops playing.
 - That could take a while, McPeck said very gravely.
 - I know, Attila nodded.
- Seamus flew quietly beside us, just letting the wind carry him.
- What was it like, growing up in the Zoo? Munch asked him.
 - I don't know. I don't know what it's like to grow up somewhere else, so I can't tell the difference.
 - Did you like to play games when you were little?
 - Oh, sure, I played hide-and-seek with the caretaker. Every morning he would come in my cage to clean it and feed me, and I'd hide. Then, when he found me, I was so happy, I jumped on him and pecked at him.
 - What did he do?
 - He ran off. I don't know why. He always left more food than I could eat. Back then I had a polar bear as a neighbour. I used to share with him.
 - What other games did you play?
 - Well, when children came to see me, they'd stick sweets and candy between the bars, and I'd fly down out of nowhere and get them. I always meant to give them back, but they all left so quickly... So I gave them to the polar bear.
 - What happened to the polar bear?
 - He got fat and they moved him to a different Zoo, where he could get more exercise. They put a camel in his place. She was all right, except that she was always grumpy. Whenever kids came up to her, she yelled at them: "What are you looking at? How would you like it if I stared at you when you were having dinner?", and then she spat at them.
 - What other friends did you have? von Gulp asked.
 - There was Rodney.
 - What was he?
 - I don't know, I could never really make up my mind. An eagle or a vulture. I used to tell him everything.
 - Ah, so he didn't really exist?
 - Of course he did. I made him up.





- And what happened to him?
- He moved away and we lost touch. And there was James, as well.
- What was he?
- He wasn't anything, he was just James. But he was always nasty, so I stopped talking to him.
- What was your favourite thing to do when you were growing up?
- What does growing up mean?
- Your childhood.
- I'm not sure I've had any of those. No one ever really gave me presents.
- No, no. You grow up from the time you hatch until you're... all grown up, like a real full-grown bird.
- Oh, I see. Well, I guess I was born all grown up, because I've been doing the same things I've always done ever since I can remember.
- What did you like to do for Christmas?
- What's Christmas?
- It's that time of the year when people decorate their houses, and trees. Everything is white. And they sing, too.
- Oh, so that's what it was. They used to put red ribbons on our cages, tie them around the bars. Every day I'd untie mine and take it up to my nest. By the time it was over, I had the softest nest, full of ribbons. They tried to decorate a tree once, but they put it too close to the giraffe's corner, and the giraffes ate half of it one night, and the monkeys stole all the decorations.
- Did you ever get bored there?
- No, never. You see, all the animals at the Zoo have signed a secret agreement: everyone takes turns telling a story. This way, we're never bored, we're always looking forward to hearing a new story every night. The tiger told the best stories by far, though the Boa Constrictor told some pretty good ones, too.
- What's that, a Boa Constrictor?
- That's a really big snake. But he's very lovable. He likes to give everybody a big hug. He's very clingy, though, he doesn't like to let go.
- But how did you hear the stories? Your cages are so far apart.
- By word of mouth. The story teller tells the story to the animals around him, then each animal tells it further. Those cockatoos were really bad at telling, though. They lisped, and I couldn't understand anything they said. Ever since they moved in, I haven't heard a decent story. You didn't get me out a day too soon, you see.
- We tell stories, too. Whenever it's foggy.





—Oh, good, I love stories.

It got quiet for a while, then. The river was taking us over mountains. There were forests on both sides. Then the moon came out from behind a cloud, and all the stars were reflecting in the water. Suddenly Seamus called out:

—Look, there's someone in the water, and they can't get out! I can see their eyes.

We all looked down, but we couldn't see a thing. Seamus suddenly dived straight into the water.

—What, are you nuts? You're a vulture, you can't swim! Why am I even asking him. Of course he's nuts, but we already knew that, didn't we? Munch said, and followed Seamus into the water. A little while later he came back out with Seamus. Theo and Attila grabbed him, but he was too heavy, so the owls helped, too. They put him on the grass and waited for him to come to his senses:

—Seamus? Can you hear us?

He opened his eyes:

—Oh, you got them out. They're flying now.

—Who?

And Seamus pointed out to the starry night sky.

—Those are stars.

—But they were in the water. Stars only stay in the sky, Seamus said.

—No, that was just their reflection. Look, Attila held his wing over the water. Seamus could see its reflection. Do you see now?

—Yes... I've never seen so much water. They used to leave me a small bucket only.

—Well, you know what water is like now. Let's go, Munch said, shaking the water off his feathers.

—Thank you, Seamus said.

—Yeah, don't mention it. It's been a long time since I last had a swim anyway, Munch said.

As soon as Seamus was all dry, we took off again.

—Have you always been together? Seamus asked.

—We have, Wilfred II answered, we're brothers. But we're all friends now. So, I guess, now you're our friend, too.

—Really? I've never had so many friends at once.

—Yes, and we're real, too, Wilfred II giggled.

Seamus went on flying and smiling for the rest of the night. Just as the night

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was turning into day, we reached the city.

—So this is Lentia, Wilfred I said. It doesn't seem very big. Let's find a place to spend the day.

—And something to eat, added Squeaky, who was just now beginning to wake up.

We flew around over the house rooftops and over what looked like a cathedral.

—Let's try that, Theo said, pointing to the cathedral.

We landed on the roof, but hardly had we touched it when a small little bird yelled at us:

—Private property! Go away! This is ours!

—And who are you? Wilfred I asked.

—We're kestrels, and this is our roof!

—Well, I don't see any nests here.

—That's because we don't build nests. We have the whole roof! Stay away, or I'll pinch you!

—You're very mean! Very mean, indeed.

—I may be mean, but I'm bigger than you! the kestrel said while spreading his wings.

—Oh, really? Seamus said, and flew over the kestrel.

—Yes, you're big, Attila smiled and landed next to him.

—Huge, even, Theo said while he was landing, too.

The kestrel took a few steps back, then ran off screaming:

—Mummy! Mummy!

—Psst! Over here, a voice came from a nearby tree. Come on over here, we've got plenty of room.

We flew over and found a group of little birds that looked like little crows.

—Hello, you must be new here.

—Yes, we are. What are you madam, if I may? Theo asked.

—We're Jackdaws. We're much nicer than kestrels, you know. They're always trying to pick a fight. You can stay here and rest. We'll even make you some of our special Linzer Torte. We use a recipe that's almost a thousand years old. One of my great great great-grandfathers gave it to a chef in the city five centuries ago, and now it's very popular with people, too. Oh, but look! Isn't that your friend?

We looked down to see Squeaky going into the cathedral all by himself, and not walking very firmly, either.

—We'll get him, Wilfred IV said.

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But just as the owls wanted to enter the cathedral, they heard voices: a man and a woman:

– “Doctor, are you sure it’s safe to let him go into the cathedral? You remember what happened the last time...”

– “Yes, but he’s had a little rest now, and the doctor at the sanatorium said that if his symptoms didn’t recur, he could be fine, that it was all due to stress. We might not even have to take him all the way to the Black Forest any more. Come on, are you ready?”

A third man came.

– “Yes, I’ll just be a minute. I’ll say a short prayer and we’ll be off. I can’t wait to get to my parishioners”, the third man said while walking in.

– “See, I told you. He’s fine now.”

The third man walked into the cathedral, went forward and knelt at the end of the aisle. Squeaky was slowly walking up towards him, calling out:

– Come out, come out, wherever you are! Peek-a-boo, I see you!

He headed straight for the man.

– We’ve got to do something fast. We’ve got to go get him, Wilfred I decided.

One after the other, the owls flew in, as quietly as they could.

– I’ll go from here, Wilfred IV said, and went ahead while his brothers were waiting down the aisle.

– Squeaky, over here! Squeaky!

But Squeaky had fallen asleep right there, near the man’s feet, and was snoring away, so Wilfred IV went up to him and picked him up. The man moved a little, then went on mumbling. We met Wilfred IV in the air and were just about to leave the cathedral, when Squeaky let out a high-pitched scream:

– Whee! I’m flying! I’m flying!

The man turned:

– “It’s the owls again! All four of them! The owls! It’s a sign!”

– “Right, doctor. He’s just fine, he’s peachy. I’ll go get the sedative! Stress, huh? I’ll tell you who’s stressed,” the woman said.

– “Oh, dear, here we go again. The Black Forest Sanatorium it is. I heard it’s lovely this time of the year.”

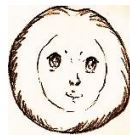
– “Did you see them? The owls?”

– “Sure, sure. You’ll be happy to know that, where we’re going, there are all sorts of birds, not just owls, and animals, too. But you’re going to go beddy-bye now.”

– “No, look, they’re flying right over your heads!”

– “Yes, say bye-bye owls, bye-bye.”





—That was close, Wilfred II said. We'll have to take turns watching him until he wakes up completely. He's quite an unpredictable little thing.





The Jackdaws were very nice, and they let us rest. They even made us their special cake, which was delicious. In the evening, we were ready to go once more.

- Why are you in such a hurry? Where are you going? one of them asked.
- We’re going to the North, we have a long way ahead of us.
- But, isn’t it dangerous? Flying at night?
- Oh, no, we’re... McPeck and Munch answered at the same time.
- Please go ahead, you say it, Munch told McPeck.
- No, that’s all right, you say it. I’ve said it more times than you, McPeck answered.
- Yes, you have. So you have more experience. You say it better.
- But you say it just as well.
- We’re nightcreatures, Seamus interrupted.
- I see, the Jackdaw said and smiled. Well, nightcreatures, I wish you a good journey!

– Goodbye, and thank you for the Linzer Torte recipe, Theo said.

Lentia wasn’t all that big. It did not take us long to fly over it. It was a dark cloudy night, and the river seemed black. The air was chilly.

- So, Squeaky, how are you feeling tonight?
- Great. Rested. Full of energy.
- I’m sure. You slept for more than a day and a night. We’ll have to keep an eye on you, you’re picking up quite a habit, Theo said.
- It wasn’t his fault. It was our idea, really, Wilfred II defended him.

Squeaky let his chin drop a little and pouted. He joined Seamus, and they flew together behind us, he flapping away his little wings, and Seamus gently floating in the night air. They were both quiet for a while.

- Do you think I’m a bad bat? Squeaky asked Seamus.
- You’re the best bat I’ve ever known, Seamus answered, and Squeaky’s face lit up, he smiled, and his eyes glistened.





– I am?

– The very best.

Then they went on flying quietly. Suddenly loud noises came from the forest below.

– What was that? Could it be thunder? Attila asked.

– No. It's gunshots. I know. I saw them shoot an animal at the Zoo once, Seamus said. They're very dangerous.

– What do they do? Wilfred I asked.

– They kill animals, Seamus whispered.

We all just stood there, frozen in mid-air.

– We should go see, someone might need our help, Theo said.

– And who's going to help us if we get hit? Munch asked.

Attila frowned at him.

– We can't all go. They'll see us, Wilfred I said.

– I'll go. I'm small enough and black enough not to be seen, Squeaky said, and he disappeared into the night, in the forest.

He was back in no time at all:

– They're going after a deer, and she's almost cornered. We've got to do something quickly!

– Who is?

– Two men. One with glasses, and one with a hat. Over there!

Squeaky led the way into the dark forest and we followed. We saw them. The deer was hiding in some bushes.

– Psst! Over here! Come on over here!

– I can't, they'll see me, the deer answered.

– We have to get the men to split up, Attila said.

– Oh, I know, Theo said and flew to some bushes a little further off.

He landed in them, making a lot of noise, then quickly flew off again.

– *"Over there, in those bushes!"*, one of the men said.

Just as they turned around, Wilfred II flew over and took one of the men's hat.

– *"Hey, what did you do that for? Give me my hat back!"*

– *"What's wrong with you? Why would I take your hat?"*

– *"I don't know, you tell me. It was on my head a minute ago, and now it's gone. See?"*

the other man answered, pointing to the bald spot on his round head.

– *"Shut up, you'll scare it away!"*

– *"Don't tell me to shut up. I'll scream if I feel like it."*

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– “Go over there and see if the deer is in those bushes.”

– “Don’t tell me what to do! I’m going to look for my hat,” and the men split up.

The hatless man was going farther and farther away, while the other one was looking about. After checking the bushes, the second man headed for the deer.

– I have an idea, von Gulp said.

He flew near the man’s shoulders and took his glasses.

– “Heey! What are you doing, you idiot! Don’t you know I can’t see anything without my glasses?”

The hatless man came running:

– “What are you yelling at me for? I didn’t take them!”

– “And who did?”

– “I don’t know, a birdie, maybe?”, the hatless man laughed.

– “Not funny. Start looking for them!”

– “You look for them. I’m looking for my hat!”

The man without glasses got on all fours and fumbled among the fallen leaves. He put his gun down. The other one walked away, still looking for his hat.

Swiftly, Attila got the gun.

– Come on, now. Go, you’ll be safe! Attila told the deer.

– Thank you, thank you very much. Some people are looking for these men. They pass through here every night. They should be passing by any time now. If you could get those people to stop, these men would be taken away for good, the deer said and ran off.

She was right. We could hear a car, but it did not look like it was going to stop. The two men were too intent to hear anything else: they were going about their business.

– But how do we stop a car? Wilfred IV asked.

– The way we did last time, Squeaky answered.

He flew towards the car, landed on the hood, and then, clinging on to the edge of the windshield with his rear feet, he hung upside down and spread his wings across the windshield. The car stopped and threw Squeaky in a pile of leaves.

– It wasn’t so bad this time, Squeaky said, shaking off the leaves.

– All right, now! Theo told Seamus.

Seamus flew next to the man on all fours who was fumbling for his glasses, and pinched his rear end.

– “Aaaah! You idiot!”, the man screamed.

– “Stop yelling at me”, the other one answered. “I’ll tell grandma you treat me





badly!"

Two men in uniforms got out of the car.

– "Did you hear that?"

– "Yes, it must be the poachers. Maybe we'll get lucky tonight," and they headed for the poachers.

– "I want my glasses!", the man on all fours screamed.

– "So tell Santa!", the other one answered.

Von Gulp dropped his glasses next to him, just as the officers were approaching.

– "I found them! I found my glasses!" the man called out again, while putting his glasses on. "I can see... Oh... Hello, officers..."

– "Good evening. What might you be doing here so late at night? Hunting, perhaps? Poaching?"

– "What, us? Never! Why... look, we don't even have a gun!"

Attila took off. He flew over them and let the gun drop.

– "Well, look at that: your gun!"

– "It's not ours!"

Then Wilfred II threw the hat.

– "Look, my hat! It's my hat", one of the men said.

– "You idiot!" the other one answered.

– "Come on, you're under arrest!"

– "But the gun isn't ours. It belongs to the bird! Didn't you see the eagle?"

– "Yeah, sure, tell it to the judge."

– "I'll tell him! This is a conspiracy! You had the eagle drop the gun! You planted evidence!"

All four men got into the car and disappeared.

– They won't be hurting any more animals now, Seamus said.

– No, they won't. Thank you for saving my daughter, a stag said, coming towards us.

– You're welcome. You have a lovely daughter, Munch said.

Attila frowned at him.

– I don't know what I would have done without her. We lost her mother to these men a little while back, the stag spoke in a low voice.

– It's all right, I know. You haven't lost her, she hasn't gone anywhere. She's right here with you, you just can't see her any more, McPeck told him. I know, because my mummy told me.





- She was right, your mummy.
- She's always right. That's what mummies do, McPeck said.
- We'll be off now, good night to you, Sir! Wilfred I said, and we all waved as we flew off, back over the river.
- Good job, Squeaky, stopping that car, Theo said.
- Thank you, Squeaky smiled.
- It took a lot of courage.
- Well, I've got it, because I'm the best bat Seamus knows, aren't I? Squeaky said, looking at Seamus. Seamus nodded.
- Probably the only one, too, Wilfred II whispered to Wilfred III.
- A little bit further, Munch asked Seamus:
- So, have you written any letters recently?
- Attila frowned at him.
- Just curious, Munch told Attila.
- Well... no... Seamus said. But I shall... soon.
- When you do, be sure to tell her how you took on two men, and one of them had a gun. And tell her I helped you, too. And tell her about how you pinched one of them right in the behind. But tell her I didn't do that. Better still, don't tell her about that. Maybe you shouldn't tell her about the gun, either, because then she'll worry. And if you don't tell her about the gun, there really is no point to telling her we attacked two men. Then she'll think we're aggressive and antisocial. Just tell her about the weather, that's always a good subject for conversation, Munch said.
- So, what is our next destination? Theo asked.
- Castra Regina, Wilfred I answered, but I doubt we'll be reaching it tonight.
- It was soon morning, and we found a good place to rest. Munch and Attila fished, so we had a nice meal the following evening. Then off we go again.
- Castra Regina, here we come! Wilfred II called out. I have such energy tonight. Let's play a game!
- Let's reach Castra Regina first, and see what we find there. Keep that energy, we might need it, Wilfred IV said.
- The evening sky is slowly growing darker and darker, and soon enough lights begin to shine from behind the hills in front. As we get closer, we see it isn't that big a city, with small houses. What stands out is a church with two sharp towers.
- Let's go get a closer look, Wilfred II said.
- 'St. Peter's Dome', the little sign in front reads.
- So this belongs to St. Peter? Let's see if he's in, pay him a visit, Munch said.





—I suppose we could take a quick look, Theo agreed.
As we entered, we found ourselves surrounded by colourful glass windows.
—Let's go up to the roof, Wilfred II said. I can reach it first. No one's faster than me.

—I think I am, Wilfred III said.
—Stop this nonsense. We all know I'm the fastest, because I'm the oldest, Wilfred I said.

And all four owls jumped up and flew towards the roof.

—I want to come, too, wait for me! Squeaky called out.

The others sat in between the aisles.

—*"What is this? Birds, in the dome? Call the guards to take them away!"*, a man walked in, then closed the door behind him as he went back out.

Two men came in with huge bags.

—*"Do you see anything?"*

—*"No. Keep looking."*

—What do we do now? Wilfred II asked.

—We stay put, Wilfred I answered. Hold on tight, Vic, Mr Whiskers. Squeaky, are you all right?

—Yes, fine.

Squeaky was hanging upside down from a bar.

—*"I think the old man has been seeing things again. Let's go."*

Then, all of a sudden, Squeaky slipped.

—*"Look, up there!"*, the men turned.

Wilfred I dashed down and caught Squeaky just in time. Both of us, me and Mr Whiskers, were holding on for dear life.

—What a ride, Vic.

—Indeed, Mr Whiskers.

—*"Got you!"*

—*"It's an owl."*

—*"And a bat. Let's go outside."*

—Where are we? Squeaky asked.

—In a bag, I should think. It seems the men have caught us, Mr Whiskers answered.

—I do hope the others stay still, lest they should get caught, too, Wilfred I said.

—*"What do we do with them?"*

—*"We'll take them home. We'll think about it."*





From the noise it made, we were in a car. The bag was tightly tied.

– We'll never get out of here, Squeaky said.

– Sure we will. The others will come for us, you'll see.

After a while the car stopped. Someone grabbed us and carried us inside.

– *"Let's see. The bat's worthless, we'll let him go."*

– Did you hear that? They're letting you go. Look for the towers and go there.

Make sure you remember the way, so you can bring the others back here, Wilfred I said.

– I shall. Not to worry. I'll save you.

The minute the bag was opened, Squeaky flew out, and out the window. Then they closed the bag.

– *"What do we do with the owl?"*

– *"I heard about someone who buys birds. He trains them to go hunting. He'll pay good money for it. I'll call him."*

– At least they're not going to cook me, Wilfred I said.

The two men left the room.

– It's just us now. And it's so dark.

– They'll find us soon, I know they will, Mr Whiskers said.

Suddenly, someone moved the bag.

– Who's there? Wilfred I asked.

– Hello, it's just me, Sniffy.

– Well, pardon us, but we can't really see you very well.

– I'm a cat. But I'm going to grow up to be a lion.

– I see. I'm an owl.

– So I've heard.

– Would you help us out of here?

– Who's with you?

– My friends: Vic, the chestnut, and Mr Whiskers, the mouse.

– I'd love to help you, but how?

– Untie the bag.

– It's really tight... Here, let's see if this works.

Suddenly Sniffy got his claws into the bag and tried to tear it.

– That was close. Your claws are very sharp, you know.

– Yes, but I can't cut through.

– *"Hey, you! Get away from there!"* the men came back into the room. *"Come on, we've got to get going, we have a long drive ahead of us."*





– I'm really sorry, Sniffy said. But I'll get the note where they wrote the address where they're taking you. I'll give it to your friends when they come.

– Thank you!

And back into the car we went, for a drive that seemed to take for ever.

In the meantime, Squeaky reached the others.

– Squeaky, are you all right? Theo asked.

– You escaped? You're so brave, Seamus said.

– No... they let me out really. It was Wilfred they wanted. They're going to sell him.

– Oh, no. We've got to find him. Fast! Wilfred II said.

– Come on, I do believe I can remember the way, Squeaky said.

– We shouldn't have just sat there. If only we had done something, Attila said.

– Then we would have been caught, too, Theo answered.

– Without Vic and Wilfred I and Mr Whiskers... how can we ever get to the North? Wilfred III said.

– We're not going without them. We'll find them, Wilfred IV said.

– Now... let's see... was it left at the Tower and right at the bridge? Or was it right at the tower and left at the bridge? Squeaky stopped.

– Oh, come on! You're a bird, too. A strange looking one, but still, you fly. Use your sense of direction! von Gulp said.

– This way! Squeaky made up his mind.

– Are you sure? Wilfred III asked.

– You don't really want an answer to that, Wilfred II said.

After a long and winding flight, they reached the men's house.

– There, that's it! Down there. I've found it. Just like I said I would! Squeaky called out.

– Yes... Too bad you didn't say just how long it was going to take you, Wilfred II said.

Just as they landed, Sniffy came out with a piece of paper and growled. Though it seemed more like a purring noise.

– Are you the owl's friends? Sniffy asked.

– Yes. What are you doing? Theo asked.

– I'm growling. Practising for when I grow up to be a lion. I have something for you.

– Good news?

– More or less. They took your friends away.

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– That is terrible news.

– But I know where they're taking them.

– That is, indeed, wonderful news.

– Here, it's written down on this piece of paper, Theo said, then he took it and read it out loud: *'The Black Forest. First street on the right after Triberg. Mansion at end of the street.'*

– So, we've got to get to the Black Forest.

– But that's days away, Attila said. Do you know where Triberg is? he asked Sniffy.

– No. But you can ask the pigeons who live next door. They deliver letters. They should know. I do hope you find them. Good luck! Sniffy said waving goodbye and growling.

The pigeons were sleeping, and were very unhappy to be woken up in the middle of the night.

– We're truly very sorry to have disturbed you, but this is a case of the utmost urgency. Our friends have been kidnapped, and you're the only ones who can help us find them.

– I see. Well, very well. How can we help?

– We need to find this place, Theo said and showed the note Sniffy had given him.

– Oh, dear... oh, dear... I know where that is, but no bird in their right wings would go there willingly. I once delivered a letter there, and I must say I had a very narrow escape. A madman lives there. In a huge dark grey mansion. With very narrow windows. He's all alone, far away from other people. He collects birds: owls, eagles, vultures. Those cruel enough to be to his liking, he keeps as pets. Those who can't be trained, he either feeds to his pets or has them stuffed. The whole house is full of stuffed birds and cuckoo clocks.

– We'd better hurry. How do we get there?

– Follow the Danube to the Black Forest. The first big city you'll come across is Ulm. You'll have to fly past it. When the Danube ends, you'll have to fly North, and rather to the left. It's not a very big city. And it's the only one in the area.

Theo sketched it on the piece of paper and showed it to the pigeon:

– Is this it?

– Yes. I wish you the very best of luck. I'd come with you if I weren't so scared myself.

– It's so much easier to have imaginary friends, Seamus said. You can always





imagine them in trouble then just imagine them out of it...

- He's got a point there, Wilfred II said.
- Perhaps your nightingale will help us find them? von Gulp asked Munch.
- My what?
- Your nightingale. The one from the Black Forest?
- Oh, right, right... Well, she moved. A while ago.
- When did you learn of that?
- A while ago, I told you.
- Did she write you a letter? Attila asked Munch, and frowned.
- Yes, yes, of course.
- I see. And where has she moved?
- Up North.
- Of course. So you'll be joining us for the rest of the trip then?

Munch didn't answer at first. He just looked at Attila with huge sad eyes, then said:

- Well... If you want me.
- Of course we do, Attila quickly replied, not bearing to look into Munch's eyes.

– Really, you do? Oh, really? Oh, good. Because, you know, there never really was any nightingale.

Attila frowned again.

- Oh, I'm so happy, Munch went on.
- This is hardly the time to be happy. We've got to find Wilfred I while he's still a bird, not just a puppet stuffed with straw.
- Never? Really? She didn't exist? No nightingale? von Gulp asked.
- Well, I'm sure there are plenty of them in the Black Forest, just none I'd know.
- And I was so looking forward to meeting her.
- The sun is rising, and we're not even half way there... At this rate, it will take us days and days to get there, Theo said.

– We have to save him. Without Wilfred I nothing will ever be the same. Even our names will lose meaning. What's the point of being called Wilfred II, or III, or IV, when there is no Wilfred I, said Wilfred II.

– And I've been so mean to him, ever since we were little... I haven't even had a chance to apologize, said Wilfred III.

– Stop talking like that. He'll be fine. You'll see, said Wilfred IV. He has to be fine. He was the first to hatch, after all.





—We'll have to stop here until tonight, said Attila. We'll need our rest. Who knows what lies ahead...

They found a good place to rest, but no one felt like either sleeping or eating.

—Will you write Sheena about this? Munch asked Seamus.

—No, not yet. I'll wait to make sure Wilfred I is safe. I don't want to jinx his escape.

—Wise decision.

It took longer than ever for that day to pass. When it was finally dark, everyone was up and ready to go. As they flew, they could notice how narrow the river was getting.

—What do you think? Are we there yet? Munch asked.

—No, we haven't even passed Ulm, Theo answered.

—Let's fly faster! Look at me, see how fast I'm going? McPeck said while beating his wings faster than ever.

—Slow down, little one: it will take a lot more than this to get to Wilfred I in time, Attila sighed.

—Look! It's the train! von Gulp was right.

A railroad passed alongside the river.

—All we need now is a train, and we'll be there in no time!

—Actually, we'll need to find a station. We'll never be able to get on a moving train, Theo said.

—Well, then all we have to do is follow the tracks. They should lead us to a station, Munch said.

—You are right, Munch. You really are, Theo said and smiled.

—So... what do you think? Have we found a station yet? Munch asked.

—No, not yet, Theo answered.

A little time went by, then Munch asked again:

—Have we found it now?

—I think we'll know when we find it. Stations tend to be very big, for people to see.

—Well... it's almost morning again... what if this is just an endless railroad, no stations? Attila asked.

—We've found it now! Munch said.

—You'll have to be a little more patient, Theo replied.

—No, I'm telling you: we've found it! Look ahead!

Munch was right. Up ahead there was a train and lots of birds flying over it.





– So, have we found it or have we found it? Munch asked.

– We've found it all right. Come on, our train is waiting!

They reached the station in no time, just as the train was about to leave. A swallow was flying up and down the train, calling out:

– All aboard!

They landed on the rooftop of one of the carriages.

– Tickets, please! the swallow came up to them.

– We don't have any.

– You still have time to get them. Up at the first carriage.

Theo took off quickly and rushed over to the first carriage. The same swallow met him there.

– You again?

– Yes. Now how many?

– But why couldn't you give us the tickets back there?

– Because back there I only check them. It's only here that I give them.

– Ten, please. But what would you like in return?

– Oh, nothing. Here you are.

– Then why do we need to have tickets?

– Because we don't like carrying birds without tickets on the train. Here you are. Enjoy your journey.

Theo flew back and got to the others at the same time as the swallow.

– Tickets, please!

– But you've just given them to me.

– Yes, and now I need to check them. Suppose you lost one along the way. All right, you have your tickets, you're all set. I'll go check up on the other passengers, and I'll be back. Where did you say you were going?

– Triberg.

– You'll have to change trains. I'll let you know where, the swallow said, then went away. A minute later he returned.

– You're back already? Wilfred IV asked.

– Yes, no more passengers. So I'll stay with you. What are you going to Triberg for?

– Our friends were kidnapped, Theo answered and showed him the note. This is where we're going.

Seeing it, the swallow took a step back.

– Oh... that is a very dangerous place. Be very careful.

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- How long will it take us to reach it?
- A few hours. Hold on! The train is about to leave Ulm Station! the swallow announced.





After a long drive, the two men stopped.

– *“This must be it. It looks dreary.”*

– *“Let’s go, give him the owl, get the money, and get out of here.”*

They picked the bag up, and we could hear their footsteps up a flight of stairs. Then they knocked. Someone opened the door and let them in, then, in a very low tone, said:

– *“Put the owl in that cage.”*

One of the men stuck his hand in the bag:

– Pinch him, Wilfred I, Mr Whiskers said. This way, he’ll be afraid of you.

– I can’t, I’ve never pinched anyone except my brothers, Wilfred I answered.

– Then I will, Mr Whiskers said as he bit one of the man’s fingers. The man screamed.

The man who opened the door laughed.

– *“All right, I’ll take it.”*

He then grabbed the bag, shook us right into the cage, and locked the door with a key.

– *“Our money?”*, the other man asked.

The man who opened the door was all dressed in black, with a long black overcoat, black leather gloves. He pointed to a box on a table nearby and said:

– *“Get it yourself.”*

The man who asked went over to the table, slowly opened the box, then took the top off completely. An eagle jumped out. The man screamed.

– *“It’s stuffed! Get the money and let’s go!”* the other man yelled.

The man in black laughed again. The other two left, and we were alone with him. He came closer to the cage.

– *“I’ll get a better look at you tomorrow night. The sun is far too bright today”,* he said, and then took the cage to a different room, where there were dozens of other cages.

He left us there, and left.

– Aaaah, fresh blood..., a voice came from a nearby cage.

– Don’t mind him, it’s just his way of saying welcome, an eagle in a cage to our right said. I do hope you last longer than the last one.

– The last one? Wilfred I asked.

– Yes, he’s over there, the eagle said, pointing to an owl sitting on a cabinet.

– So, he’s free now?





– Free? the eagle laughed. No, he's stuffed.

– I do hope they find us quickly, Wilfred I whispered to us as he withdrew to the back of the cage.

– Don't worry, just do what he asks, then you'll be all right, a gentle voice whispered.

– What does he ask?

– That you catch mice and rabbits.

– Then I'm more likely to get stuffed.

– You said something about someone finding you?

– Yes, my friends.

– Do you really think they'll come? Everyone's afraid of this house.

– My friends are very brave.

– Well, they'll probably have a little time. He'll start with that eagle. She got here before you, the bird said, and pointed out an eagle a few cages down.

– Hello, excuse me... Wilfred I tried to get the eagle's attention.

– Hello, the eagle sighed.

– How did you get here?

– I was trapped in the mountains. I've already failed all his tests. He said tomorrow was my final test.

– What will you have to do?

– Catch an animal.

– What do you have to do with the animal?

– I don't know, let him go I guess.

– So, if you caught a mouse, would that be all right? Mr Whiskers asked.

– I'll never catch a mouse.

– You could catch me, or pretend to, anyway.

– Are you a mouse?

– I am. And you can carry me, then pretend you've caught me. How far can you go?

– Not very. He ties a rope around my foot.

– All you have to do is hide me in your feathers, then pretend to be catching me.

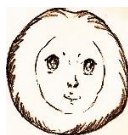
– You'd do that for me?

– Sure, Mr Whiskers said.

He got out of the cage, and went to the eagle.

The day passed quickly. At dusk, the man entered the room, pulled the curtains





and opened the window.

– “Your last try”, he said to the eagle. “If you don’t catch anything tonight, it’s bye bye time. I have a new toy now,” he said, looking at Wilfred I.

Then he took the eagle out of her cage, put a chain around her foot, and took her to the balcony. The eagle took off, flew into the night, then came back with Mr Whiskers, whom she was holding by the tail.

– “Wonderful! Finally! Now eat it!”

Mr Whiskers jumped up. The eagle just stood there, unmoved.

– “Eat it!”

Then she opened her beak and let Mr Whiskers fall into the grass.

– “Go get it!”

– You go, you mean, two-legged beast! she yelled at him.

He grabbed the eagle and threw her back in the cage.

– “You’ll see! Now, you’ll see!”

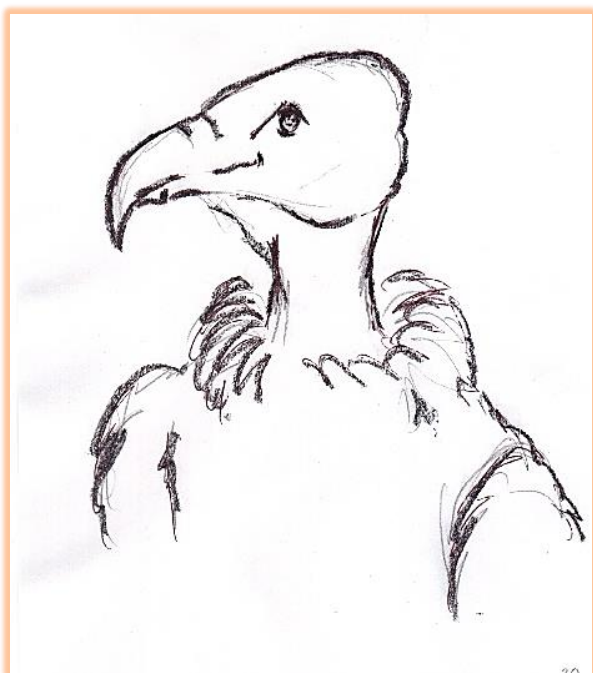
He went out and slammed the door.

– Triberg Station! the swallow announced.

– Thank you!

– Be careful! I wish you all the best. I really do.

– Triberg really isn’t very big, Theo said. Come on, we don’t have much time. We’re already running late.





They flew over the city quickly, then came across a little alley to the right.

– This must be it, Wilfred II said.

– You haven't written to Sheena, yet, have you? Munch asked Seamus.

– No.

– Good, I wouldn't want you jinxing our escape, either.

The alley was long and narrow. Just as they reached the house, they heard a voice.

– Psst! Psst! Over here! Down here!

– Mr Whiskers! Oh, how I've missed you, Wilfred II landed over him.

– Please get off, you're sitting on my head.

– So sorry. Are you all right?

– Yes, yes, but you have to hurry. He's going to stuff an eagle, and she's a very nice eagle, too, wouldn't even hurt a mouse. Hurry. Up there. But you can't go in through the balcony, he'll see you. Go in through the open window next to it.

They all went in, one by one, into the room next to where we were. They were just about to leave that room when, from a clock on the wall, a bird came out:

– Get away from me! Keep away! Munch screamed.

– It's just a cuckoo clock.

– Oh, poor bird. What a boring job.

– It's not real. Just a puppet.

The bird came out of the clock again.

– It may not be alive now, but it once was. It's stuffed, Wilfred II said.

– Come on, let's go.

They slowly opened the door to the other room. The man was there. He had a knife in one hand, and was getting the eagle out.

– Do something! Munch shouted at Seamus.

Seamus knocked the table over. On the table there was a candle, and it fell on the wooden stairs, which quickly caught fire. The man put the eagle back in her cage and rushed out. Seeing the fire, he didn't have time to notice the birds. He went out





towards the stairs. They went into the room and locked the door.

– You’ve come! You’ve made it! I knew you would! Wilfred I called out.

Seamus went over to his cage and pulled the door out with his beak.

– You’ve come just in the nick of time. Free her, as well, Wilfred I said, pointing to the eagle. Free everyone.

Attila went over to the eagle’s cage and opened her door:

– Come out, you’re free now.

When she came out, he could clearly see her face in the moonlight.

– Sharpsey!

– Attila! she said. You’ve found me, and she put her head on his shoulder while he wrapped his wings around her.

One by one, the birds were all freed.

– Come on, let’s go!

– Wait, I left Vic in the cage, Wilfred I said, turned back, and his brothers went with him.

All of a sudden, the man tore the door down. We barely managed to fly out the balcony. We stopped in a tree nearby. In the meantime, the whole house had caught fire. Many cars came, with bright lights and sirens, and brought out hoses with which they tried to extinguish the fire. They put up a ladder and helped the man down.

– *“What happened, Sir?”*

– *“Four owls. They stole all my birds. They must have set the house on fire, too.”*

– *“You don’t say. Well, don’t worry, we know just where to take you: a nice bright place, with flowers and many colourful little birds.”*

– *“No, no, no flowers, no light, no more birds!”* the man screamed.

Attila and Sharpsey flew a little further away. They sat and talked in a tree.

– They have a lot of catching up to do, Wilfred I said.

– I don’t understand, if he loved her, why didn’t he try to find her sooner?

Munch asked.

– He didn’t know where to look, Theo answered.

– They look nice together, Seamus sighed.

– So, have you written to Sheena yet? Munch asked Seamus.

– No...

– Well, when you do, remember to tell her I was the one who planned the escape. I told you what to do.

– You just said to do something.

– Yes, and I was right, wasn’t I? See how well it has all turned out. And





remember to tell her about the birds we freed, and what the man would have done if we hadn't stopped him. On second thought, don't tell her that, it might scare her. Don't say anything about that scary man. Better this way. And since you won't speak of that man, it might be best not to mention the whole thing. After all, we shouldn't want her to think we're a bunch of arsonist birds who go into people's houses and set them on fire.

Attila and Sharpsey flew over:

– Well, I guess this is goodbye, Attila said.

– Is it? McPeck asked.

– Yes, Sharpsey and I are going to the mountains near here.

– You are? Squeaky asked.

– Yes, we'll live there.

– But you can live up north, too, von Gulp said.

– Well, we understand, of course. Perhaps you'll come to visit us on your honeymoon.

– Yes, perhaps.

Then he and Sharpsey flew off:

– Thank you, we never would have found each other without you.

McPeck sighed. Squeaky moved closer to him and put his thin black wing around him, and they sighed together.

– Come on, time to go, Wilfred I said in a low voice.

– This is where we are, Theo showed him on the map. From here, we'll just need to cross the Black Forest and find the Rhine.

– He won't forget us, will he? Wilfred I asked Theo.

– No. It was because of us that he found her.

– Well, let's go. Waiting here won't bring them back, Munch said.

Off we flew. Everyone was quieter than ever. We flew over trees and little cabins here and there, and mountain creeks.

– We have to go back! We have to find Attila! We have to! Mr Whiskers yelled.

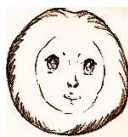
– Why? What's wrong?

– He left his egg shell piece here.

– That's all right. We'll hold on to it for him. I doubt he'll need it now, Theo said.

Towards morning we found ourselves flying over a huge white house with a big garden full of rocking chairs. Women in white robes were walking around. In a corner of the garden two men in strange white jackets, both with their hands tied





behind their backs, were sitting in two chairs, rocking back and forth.

– “They’ve brought me here without any reason at all. I don’t understand. I really don’t.”

– “When did you get here?”

– “A few days ago. You?”

– “Late last night. I don’t know why they’ve brought me here, either. First, my house catches fire and then I find myself in a nut house.”

– “Same with me. Except my house didn’t catch fire. I found four owls in my church one night. And I went from one priest to the next, to tell them what I’d seen... And this is where I end up.”

– “Four owls you say?”

– “Yes, four owls. And I’ve been seeing them everywhere.”

– “Where did you last see them?”

– “In Linz, at the Cathedral.”

– “You see, I saw four owls, too. They set my house on fire. And they stole all my birds. They could be the same ones.”

– “You saw them, too?”

– “I’m telling you, I did.”

A woman walked up to the two men:

– “All right, you too. Enough for now. You’ll get to share stories after breakfast. If you behave, you might even get to play a game or two. Come on, time for your medicine now. Look at these nicely coloured pills, aren’t they nice?”

– What are pills? Squeaky asked.

– I don’t know, Theo said.

– Do you think they taste nice? They look yummy, Squeaky said, and dashed down from the tree, straight for the tray the woman was carrying.

He took a mouthful of those coloured pills, and tried to fly back up, but, as he was midway between us and the tray, he started to slow down, his wings weren’t beating as fast any more, he wasn’t flying in a straight line, either. In the meantime the woman went screaming:

– “Help, a bat! It’s attacking me! Help!”

Squeaky was getting dizzier and dizzier.

– We have to get him. He’s falling, Wilfred IV said.

– Let’s go!

All four owls went, each grabbing a leg or a wing, and they pulled Squeaky up. The men, who only a second before were sitting quietly, jumped out and started





calling out:

– *“It’s the owls, they’re here! All four of them!”*

A man in white ran out:

– *“What’s all this noise about?”*

– *“It’s the owls I’ve been telling you about, they’re here. And he saw them, too, he can tell you.”*

– *“Well, you have a reliable witness now, don’t you. No one will ever doubt you again,”* the man in white said. *“Now, tell me, why haven’t you taken your pills today? Don’t you want to go back to your church sooner?”*

– *“But I have, ask the nurse!”*

– *“Much good that will do me. She comes in with half the pills she was supposed to give you today and she wants me to believe a bat took them. At least she’s in the right place. Well, never mind. Here, have some more pills. There. All better now. Do you still see the owls?”*

– *“No.”*

– *“See how fast they work?”*

By the time Squeaky had reached the branch, he was half asleep. He woke up every once in a while and talked to Theo:

– Hello, Theo 1, Theo 2, Theo 3, Theo 4... Where did you all come from?

Then he’d laugh a little and doze off again.

– Do you think he’ll be all right? Munch asked Theo. He looks awfully cheerful.

– He’ll be fine. I’m just not sure when.

– Come on, everyone. Let’s all rest a little, it’s been a long couple of nights, Wilfred I said, and we all agreed.

When we woke up, it was already pitch black.

– We’ve slept late today, haven’t we? McPeck said.

Squeaky was still snoring away, Munch opened his eyes lazily, Seamus stretched. Theo had got up earlier. He went to find something to eat.

– What have you got there, Theo? Munch jumped up.

– You’ll never guess: ham and cherry-chocolate cake. This place is famous for this.

– Where did you get them? Wilfred I asked.

– Down below. They dined out tonight.

– Didn’t they notice you?

– A man did. He told a woman in white there was a raven at the table. She told him to mind his manners and help me to whatever I wanted. So here I am. He really was very helpful. A man in a white coat noticed the cherry-chocolate cake was





missing. The man who gave it to me told him a raven had taken it, and the man in white gave him a few more pills. They really like their pills down there.

Everything was truly delicious. And it was nice to all be together again. Or almost all. Unlike the other nights, we were in no hurry to leave.

Squeaky was half awake at some point:

– What smells good? I'm hungry!

But then he fell right back asleep. We left him a piece of ham and a slice of cake to have when he woke up.

– Perhaps we could spend just one more night here. It's not so bad after all. Nice trees, great food, and even the people aren't so bad, Wilfred II said.

– Yes, let's do that. I heard a very nice chirp when I got up. I'm really curious who that came from. A real beauty, I'm sure, Munch said.

– Well, one night of rest won't hurt, right, Vic? Wilfred I asked.

– Yes, of course. It is lovely here.

– But we should still stick together, lest we should get lost, Theo said, and everyone agreed.

– Now, let's take a tour of the place, Munch said.

– Wait, someone has to watch Squeaky, Wilfred II pointed out.

– That's all right, I will. I'm big enough to catch him if he rolls off, too, Theo said.

– But don't you want to see the surroundings?

– No, you'll tell me all about them.

And so we flew off, leaving Theo behind with Squeaky.

– He looks sad..., McPeck said, looking at Theo.

– Do you suppose he didn't like the cherry-cake? Munch asked.

– No. Maybe one of these pills would help him, Wilfred II suggested.

– No, no! Look what they did to Squeaky, Wilfred I protested.

– Let's find something nice for him, Seamus said. Back at the Zoo, whenever they brought something new, it always cheered me up. One day the caretaker came in wearing a funny coloured hat, full of flowers. That was so much fun, we played with it for days. He'd try to get it back, and I'd take it higher and higher up. Then one day he got upset he wasn't winning and stopped playing with me.

– But what can we get him? von Gulp asked.

– Let's look until we find something, Wilfred IV said.

We landed on the forest floor and looked among the leaves, and in the bushes, but didn't see anything. Walking about we came upon a little lake. On the shore, half





dry and half bathing in water there was a very thin, shiny little stone, shaped like the head of a bird, with a bent beak. Like the head of an eagle.

— I've got it! Munch called out.

He ran for it, and was just about to pick it up.

— Stand back! Stand back! Wilfred I screamed, but Munch didn't listen, and he suddenly found himself in front of a huge bear's paw.

The bear growled.

— You leave him alone, or... or... I'll tell my mummy! Wilfred I said.

The bear growled again.

Munch took a step back, then another one, and another one and he soon joined us:

— What do we do now? he whispered.

— We fly off, run for our lives, scurry, drift off into the sky, escape, that's what! Get the idea? von Gulp asked.

— No, we've got to get that stone.

— I'll get it, McPeck said, and he ran off, going very fast, right in between the bear's paws.

The bear tried to catch him and ended up stumbling over his own feet, falling flat on his tummy. McPeck got the stone and flew back.

— Come on, everyone, take off!

We hurried back to Theo. He was sitting next to Squeaky and sighing every once in a while.

— We have something for you, McPeck said.

— For me?

— Yes. We found it and thought of you. We even fought off a bear for it! Munch said.

— For me? Really? A bear?

— Yes. I told him I'd tell mummy on him, but he didn't care. Clearly he does not know our mummy, Wilfred I said.

McPeck walked up to Theo and handed him the stone. Theo took it, looked at it, and he smiled:

— Thank you.

Then he sighed again, and a small tear ran down his cheek.

— Don't you like it? McPeck asked.

— I do, I really do. I'll tell you what: I'll find a nice piece of thread and I'll wear it around my neck. Thank you.





—Mmmm! Food! Food!

Squeaky woke up and found the ham and cake. He dived into the cake, and fell asleep again, with his head in the cake. Theo put him back and cleaned his little nose of chocolate.

There were still a few hours until morning, but resting seemed like the thing to do. The hours passed quickly and before we knew it, it was night again. Another scrumptious meal, and we were ready to leave. Even Squeaky was up and about.

—Is everyone ready? Wilfred I asked.

—Yes.

—Good. Then we should get going.

—Yes.

—Now, perhaps.

—Yes.

—Let's go.

—Yes.

—We'll go now.

—We will.

—Yes, we'll go now, Wilfred I repeated.

The branches behind us shook, and suddenly two large figures came out of the dark.

—I'm so glad you're still here.

—Who's there? Wilfred I asked.

—It's Attila! It's him! Theo jumped up.

—Yes, it's me and Sharpsey. We thought... perhaps we could come with you. After all, we can live in the North, too, he smiled.

—Of course you can! Munch laughed.

Theo went over to him and gave him the stone we'd given him. He found a piece of golden thread and put it through a hole in the stone.

—Here, I'd like you to have this, from all of us. Welcome back.

—Thank you. It is good to be back.

—We should go now, Wilfred I said, and we took off, flying all together, as before.

—Have you written to Sheena? Munch asked Seamus.

—No, not yet.

—Well, when you do, be sure to tell her how bravely I stood up to that bear, and... oh, never mind.





We were all very quiet part of the way.

—So, Sharpsey, did you leave your family behind? Wilfred I asked.

—No, not really. They left me behind a long long time ago.

—Why? McPeck asked.

—We were looking for a home, and I saw a ready made nest perched on top of a mountain. So I went to it, and sat in it. I told them all to come, but it turned out the nest belonged to someone, an eagle. And, when my parents came, he chased them away, he thought they were hunting me. My parents never returned, and he raised me. But he was quite old. A little while ago he went fishing, and didn't return. I waited for him for days.

—Yes, grown ups do that, McPeck said firmly.

—I went to look for him, and ended up in a trap, Sharpsey went on.

—Was he a nice eagle?

—Yes, very. He had a family of his own, he even had grandchildren. I loved it when they came to visit and we'd play.

—Did you play many games together? Squeaky asked.

—Yes, tons, the only time they came.

—Psst! Mr Whiskers whispered to Attila.

Attila smiled.

—What is it? Sharpsey asked.

—We have something that belongs to you. We were keeping it safe for Attila, he said, while showing her the piece of egg shell.

—You still have it, Sharpsey smiled. Then suddenly she became grave.

—What's wrong? Attila asked.

—It's not mine, Sharpsey said firmly.

—What do you mean? It's the very piece you gave me.

—I mean what I say, and it isn't mine.

—Who else's could it be? I've held on to no other egg shell.

—A cuckoo's. He dropped an egg in our nest one morning. A little bird hatched. While my parents took it back to the forest, I took a piece of its shell and flew to you. I knew we were leaving. I just didn't want you to forget I ever existed.

Attila sighed.

—Are you terribly upset with me?

—No, I was just thinking of all the nights I kissed it good night and slept with it under my wing.

—Well, you won't be needing it any more, Sharpsey said, while taking the egg





shell and dropping it.

It flew in little circles until it finally landed on water and floated.

– Water! River! It's a river! von Gulp called out.

– This must be the Rhine, Wilfred I said. We'll follow it up to Castrum Moguntiacum. There we'll turn right.

The Rhine was just as wide as the Danube, and flowed as peacefully. In the bright light of the moon, we could see castles here and there, well hidden under a coat of green moss, overlooking the river.

– If people can't fly, how can they build castles so much taller than they are? Squeaky asked.

– It's very simple, Theo answered. They stand one on top of the other.

– I see... Squeaky said. They must have very good balance.

We passed one castle after the next, and then we flew over a city. In the centre of it there was a big palace and, all around, carefully arranged gardens, with little paths bordered by hedges.

– Let's find out the name of this town before going any further, Wilfred II suggested.

– There's a sign down below, Attila said.

– I'll go, Squeaky offered.

– Are you sure? Wilfred I asked.

– Yes, perfectly. I'll read the sign and fly right back.

And so he did, he returned in no time.

– Well, have you got it?

– Yes, it's Karl.... Klar.... Hold on, then he went back down again and flew back up: Karls... Karl.... Klarsuins Royal Palace Gardens.

– Are you sure?

– Yes, Karlaruins Royal Garden Palaces.

– Will you repeat that?

– Karlaruins Garden Palace Royals.

– All right then, I've written it down. If you got it wrong, future generations will hold you responsible.

– No, no, this is it, I'm sure, Squeaky smiled letting all his teeth show, even the chipped one.

On we went, with no one but the cold night wind to keep us company. The wind made strange music while passing through rocks and trees.

– Did you hear that?

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—Hear what? Munch asked.

—That... It sounds like someone singing. Let's go see, Theo said.

—No, no, we mustn't, Munch said. I've heard stories about these creatures. They are nymphs of the Rhine. They fall in love only once, and if their lover isn't faithful to them, they weep and mourn so that he may hear them wherever he may be, for ever.

—This doesn't sound like someone weeping or mourning, though, Theo said. It's a song, it's cheerful.

—Then it might be a mermaid, Sharpsey said. —The eagle who raised me told me that the Rhine was full of them. They sing at night to lure men into the water.

—Well, we're not men, we're birds, so we have nothing to fear. Does anyone want to come with me? Theo asked.

—I will, Squeaky said.

—Me, too, McPeck flew forward.

—I'll come, von Gulp said.

—Well... we had better all go, we can't leave them alone, Wilfred I decided.

And off we went, following the strange little song that flowed as smoothly as the river.

—It's coming from somewhere around here, right underneath, Seamus said.

—Let's land, then, Theo suggested.

—Isn't that dangerous? Munch asked, but Theo was already quite close to the ground.

The second we were all down, the music stopped.

—It stopped, Theo sighed.

—We're trapped! We're trapped! We must flee! Munch called out. Come out, monster, show yourself!

From among the leaves a small brown bird came out.

—Scary, Attila smiled. Hello.

The little bird bowed its head.

—Why won't you speak? Were you singing just a little while ago?

The little bird nodded.

—You sing beautifully.

The little bird smiled.

—I'm Attila, this is Sharpsey, Theo, Munch... Attila introduced everyone. What is your name?

—Sol, the bird answered in a very soft voice.





– What does it come from?

– Whenever I sing, the first note of my song is a Sol.

– Do you live here?

Sol nodded.

– All alone?

Sol shook her head:

– No. With my brother and my parents.

– What's his name?

– He doesn't have one.

– How come?

– He has never sung, so no one knows what note he'll start with.

– How do you call him when you want him to come?

– I sing.

– Is that why you were singing?

Sol nodded:

– But he hasn't come.

– Where could he be?

Sol shuddered:

– I hope he wasn't caught. People caught our parents and put them in a cage.

They only lasted a day.

– I'm truly sorry, what happened to them?

– They never sang again, even after they were released.

– But if your brother has never sung, if he should get caught, what's the worst that could happen? Munch asked.

Attila frowned at him.

Sol lowered her head even more and shook it a little.

– Are there many like you here?

Sol nodded.

– Do they all sing so beautifully?

Sol shook her head:

– They don't sing at all any more. Not with so many people around...

– We'll help you find your brother, Wilfred I said, and Sol lifted her face all of a sudden. Just tell us where to look.

– He likes the castle up ahead, on the rock. You must find him tonight, we leave tomorrow. It's getting cold here. But be careful... the castle is inhabited.

– Well, I have a better idea: why don't we all sit here and sing? Maybe this way





he'll hear us and he'll come, Munch suggested and then he started singing: La, la, la.

— Come on, hurry up, Attila said. Sharpsey, why don't you stay here and keep Sol company. We'll be back soon. Munch, you're coming with us!

— Shouldn't someone stay to protect the ladies? Munch asked.

Attila frowned.

— Maybe not.

As we flew on we could see what remained of the castle's towers. The castle was mostly in ruins, with pieces of the walls missing here and there. A dark shadow over the river. We approached a balcony on the first floor.

— This is ridiculous. We don't even know what he looks like, or what to call him, Munch complained, but no one paid attention to him, except for Seamus.

— You can stick with me if you're afraid, Seamus whispered to Munch.

— I'm not afraid, I'm brave. It's you I'm concerned for.

— We'll be all right, don't worry, Attila said.

We entered a tall dark room, walking carefully over the stone floor.

— What was that? Munch jumped.

— Nothing, you're hearing things. Be quiet.

— No, there it is again.

— Shhh!

All of a sudden, from one corner of the room, a swarm of bats came towards us. We backed off and they went out the door, down the stairs. One small bat was following them:

— Hey, wait up! Wait up! Wait for me! Ooooh... I hate it when they do that!

Then he saw Munch and went:

— Booo!

Munch jumped back and hid behind Seamus. The little bat found himself face to face with Attila:

— Booo! Booo, I said!

Attila stood quietly.

— Booo? the little bat went.

— Hello, Attila spoke.

— Hello, oh, I'm so glad you're friendly... I can never get the Boo thing quite right, though it did work on that funny bird with the big beak.

— Hey, I'm a pelican! I'll have you know that. And it didn't work. I... I just came back here to protect Seamus from you! Munch said.

— Thank you, Seamus smiled.





Squeaky flew up to the bat:

– You're a bat, he said gladly.

– Yes, I am, the little bat answered proudly.

– What's your name?

– Boo-hooey, he answered. Because I can never get the Boo thing... My parents call me Thunder, though, because it thundered the night I was born.

– Did you ever try doing something else? Besides Boo, I mean? Like Hoo! Squeaky said, opening his wings. Or, Aaargh! Or even better, Moo!

Thunder tried to imitate Squeaky, but came out with an:

– Ar – Moo – Hoo? Like that? Scared yet? he asked.

– You'll need a little bit more practice. But I'll tell you what we can do, Theo said. The minute we find the nightingale we're looking for, we'll dash out of the castle screaming and yelling in terror, and then you can tell your friends you scared us away.

– Really? You'd do that? For me? Thunder smiled. Then I'll help you find the nightingale you're looking for. What's his name?

– He doesn't have one.

– How do you call him then?

– We'll have to sing... Wilfred I said.

– Oh, I know a song. It's one they sing at Christmas, Thunder said. But I don't know the lyrics. We'll have to make them up. O Christmas tree, o Christmas tree... you go on now, take turns, he said.

– How nice the moon is shining, Squeaky sang.

– O Christmas tree, O Christmas tree, and we're all glad to be here, Theo sang.

– And soon we'll find the nightingale and we can get out of here, Munch sang.

– O Christmas tree, O Christmas tree, we'll always be together, Attila sang.

– O Christmas tree, O Christmas tree, I don't know what to si-ing, McPeck went.

And then a little bird flew down from the tower and came into the room, sat on the window ledge.

– Could it be him? von Gulp asked. How can we even ask him? Is it you? What could he possibly answer?

We all went silent.

– Hello, what is your name?

He didn't answer.

– Do you have a sister, Sol?

– Yes, and a mother Fa, and a father Do, but they don't sing any more, he

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lowered his head and sighed.

— Your sister is very worried about you.

— I know... we're leaving tomorrow. It's just that I promised the dove I'd meet her here, and she hasn't come yet, and she might come, but, if she doesn't find me here, she'll think I've forgotten all about her.

— Then leave a sign behind, something to let her know you waited, and that you'll be back next spring.

— Like what?

— A music box, said Theo. Look at this, he picked up a little box he found. If you sing into this, then shut it quickly, the music will be here for when she opens it. And just to be sure she knows who it's from, we'll scratch your name on it. Go ahead, sing.

The little bird took a deep breath, then opened his little beak and let out a most beautiful melody. Then, when he stopped, he quickly closed the box and lowered his head.

— How beautiful... Theo said. Now, what is your name?

— Ti now.

— Why now? Have you changed it?

— No, but until now I couldn't make up my mind what to sing. Now I know, I'm Ti.

With his beak, Theo scratched the name Ti on the box, and put it on the window ledge.

— Don't worry, I'll protect it, I'll make sure she gets it, Thunder reassured Ti, who smiled and whispered:

— Thank you.

— We must go now. Don't be afraid, we promised Thunder we'd all rush out screaming, so he can impress his friends. Every one ready? Let's go! Now!

And we all jumped outside, the birds screaming their beaks off, and me and Mr Whiskers covering our ears. Thunder stood on the ledge, waving. His friends returned shortly.

— Did you see that? I chased them away!

— Oh, you're so brave! they all praised him, and let him sit on the box which he was to guard as a sign of appreciation.

We soon reached Sol and Sharpsey. Ti flew forward and said to his sister:

— I'm Ti.

Sol smiled. She looked at us, then:





– Thank you.

And off they went, flying and singing together. Even when we couldn't see them any more, we could still hear their voices accompanied by the sound of the river.

– Well, come, come, time to go. It will be morning soon, Wilfred I said.

And off we went, flying over the river. We could still hear their voices in the distance.

– What a pity: to have such a lovely voice and not sing for so long, von Gulp said.

– He just didn't have a song until now, Squeaky answered.

– Do you think his dove is really coming? Munch asked.

– Yes, she may just have lost her way, or been detained, Wilfred I answered.

– By the time she gets there, the song might get out of the box, and then she'll never know.

– Then the bats will tell her.

– Suppose they're away, and the wind knocks the box over into the river, and the fish pull it down, and she gets there and doesn't find anyone... she'll be upset... She'll think he forgot about her, so she'll leave and never come back again. And in spring, when Ti returns, all the way back he'll think about the songs he'll sing to her, but when he reaches the castle and doesn't find her there, he'll be really-really sad. He won't see the box, either, so he'll think she got it, but doesn't want to see him again, so he won't look for her...

– And what do you suggest, Munch? That we stay and watch until the dove comes? Theo asked.

– That's not such a bad idea, come to think of it, Munch answered. But, no, I was thinking that we should just leave her a message she can't miss. I'd hate for them not to meet again and be alone for the rest of their lives.

– We can't go back again, Attila said.

– And always wonder what could have been... Munch continued.

– We'd be wasting precious time, Attila spoke.

– And never know what really happened... Munch went on.

– So what sort of message did you have in mind? Attila asked.

– I thought we might write something on the wall, something that won't disappear or be washed away by rain.

– Resin, that's the best. It lasts for years. I once dipped my legs in a bit of resin when I was little, and I can still feel a drop on my heel, Wilfred III said.

– He was so funny, walking around, making strange noises. And one foot was





taller than the other. He walked differently, too. When Uncle Gilbert came to visit and saw him, he thought Wilfred III was mocking at him and left, and never came to visit us again, Wilfred II giggled.

—Not much of a loss. He only brought us cones, he never liked giving gifts anyway, Wilfred IV said.

—And whenever we played, he would complain to our parents what a loud noise we were making, flapping our wings. Nasty bird. Whatever became of him?

—I remember I heard mummy saying once that he found a jay bird and they deserved each other, so I don't think he was very happy, Wilfred II giggled.

—All right, time for memories later. Let's focus now, or we'll never get any further, Wilfred I interrupted.

—What shall we write? Seamus asked.

—We can't write a proper letter, we don't even know her name, von Gulp answered.

—We should keep it simple. The more we write, the more resin we'll need, Attila said.

—Let's write: "Wait for me" Munch suggested. She'll know then.

—Good idea. Gather resin everyone! Theo said, and everyone flew down into the forest and pecked at fir trees, so by the time we reached the castle, all their beaks were full of resin.

Wilfred I went first, and after he had finished his resin, Wilfred II followed. Soon, we had written clearly on the wall: "Wait for me."

—Oh, good, I feel so much better now. All right, let's go, Munch said. We can go knowing we made two birds really happy.

So once again we left the castle behind and flew on into the night, but we hadn't got very far when Munch suddenly called out:

—How long!

—What? Seamus asked startled.

—We didn't write how long!

—Don't worry, I'm sure she'll figure it out, Attila said.

—No, no. She might think he means an hour, a day, a week. And seeing he doesn't show up after days and weeks, she might go away before spring... We have to...

—Have to what? Theo asked a little irritated.

—Have to write "Until spring", lest she should fly away and fall in love with someone else, Munch answered with a sigh.

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—I agree, Sharpsey whispered to Attila.

—Come on, back we go, Attila promptly called out.

—I'm getting dizzy, McPeck said.

—It's for a good cause, Squeaky told him. We're helping two birds fall in love.

We turned once more, and we soon reached the castle we had left only minutes before, but it was clear we weren't the only ones there any more.

—What are you all doing here? What is going on? Munch asked a large group of birds sitting everywhere around the castle, on the roof, on the balcony, on the window ledges.

—Waiting, a jay bird answered. Don't you see the sign? I always knew he would come...

—I'm waiting for my swan, we were supposed to meet days ago, and I was so upset when she didn't come... I had no idea she was just running late...

—And I'm waiting here for my acorn, a little squirrel spoke up. We were best friends. One day I rolled her down the stairs of the castle, and she never come back...

—Now, see what you've done? Theo turned to Munch.

Munch lowered his head.

—We can't write anything any more. On the one hand, some of these birds might take much longer to return, on the other..., von Gulp said, take the acorn for instance, she'd have to be masochistic to come back.

We were all silent, trying to come up with a good solution. One thing was clear: we didn't need any more resin. We sat next to the others... and in that silence we could hear something. It was coming closer and closer. Wings, definitely wings, flapping. And there she was: a white dove.

Munch jumped up:

—Hello! Hello! Over here!

But the dove didn't look at him. She flew right into the castle, and we all followed, Munch first.

—Hello! Hello! he kept calling out.

The dove looked to the left and to the right, she looked all around the room. All that was there was a box. The bats were gone. She sighed.

—Don't be sad. I know something that will cheer you up right away! Promise! The dove sighed again.

Munch patted her on the shoulder. The dove suddenly jumped away. Munch held up his wings:

—I mean you no harm, really. It's about your nightingale.

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The dove shook her head.

— You're right, he isn't here. But look, he left something for you, Munch said as he showed her the box. His first song. It's in there. And it's for you.

The dove got a little notebook out and a piece of charcoal. She wrote something, then handed the notebook to Munch:

— I can't hear, I'm deaf. Please write here.

Munch smiled, then told the others what she had written, then hesitated and turned to Wilfred I:

— You write, your handwriting is nicer than mine.

Wilfred I took the notebook and wrote:

— The nightingale was here but had to leave. He left his first ever song in that box for you. He'll be back in spring.

The dove read it all, then wrote again:

— He never sang before?

— No, never, Wilfred I answered. His name is Ti.

The dove picked up the little wooden box and held it tight.

— Don't you want to open it? Ask her, von Gulp told Wilfred I, and the latter wrote it down.

The dove shook her head:

— No, I don't want it to get away, just in case I should be able to hear it one day.

Thank you, she smiled then flew away with the box and her little notebook.

Munch smiled, and his eyes were gleaming. Looking at him, we couldn't help but smile, too.

Suddenly there was a loud sharp shriek coming from behind us.

— Boo! Boo! Get away! I've scared vultures and eagles! I'm not afraid of you! Thunder screamed while flying into the room with his eyes tightly closed, until he bumped into Attila, and opened them. Oh, it's you! Oh, good. Oh... the box... Oh, dear, the box... Oh, no, oh, no, a monster must have taken it. Good you're here!

Munch looked at him and shook his head.

— What? No? You're not here? Thunder asked. Oh, no, am I sleepwalking again? Pinch me, that will wake me up!

— The box is with its rightful owner, Attila said.

— It is? Then I watched it well, didn't I? I'm brave after all, see? Thunder smiled happily. I was away for only a few minutes. I... I... thought I heard an intruder in the castle and went to scare him away. But duty called, and I came back. That's what I did, because I'm brave, he said, holding up his sharp little chin.

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—What are you doing out of bed at this hour? Get back there, time to sleep! a voice came from down below.

—Well... now that the box is where it belongs, I can rest at last, and I really should go, mummy doesn't like it when I stay up late. Good night, everyone.

—It does seem things have turned out for the best, doesn't it? Seamus said.

—Yes, and now that everything is all better, we really should get going, Wilfred I said.

—Let's go then, come on, hurry up! Munch called to us while flying out the window.

—Come on, we haven't got all night!

So we left the castle once more, only this time we got quite a bit further.

—Look, a city! Could that be Castrum Moguntiacum? Oh, we're good! We flew really fast, we're the best, Wilfred II called out.

—Not so fast. Let's find out the name first, Wilfred IV said.

—It's not really all that big... A castrum should be bigger and busier, Wilfred III said.

—Let's land there and try to find out the name. That looks like a Concert Hall, Wilfred I said, and down we went.

One by one we landed on the shiny round roof. But hardly had we had time to settle down, when a huge crow rushed forward:

—What are you doing? Not on my roof, go away! Go away from my roof!

—We mean no harm, Theo said.

—You're scratching my roof! It's my job to keep the roof shiny so that, whenever the sun rises, it can reflect in it. And you're scratching it with your claws!

—We'll be very careful, promise! Munch said.

—I've heard that before: and then they brought seeds on the roof and pecked at them, scratched it all over. No, I'm not taking any chances, go away!

—But all we want is to find out the name of this town, Attila said.

—Well, it isn't written here, so off with you, the crow answered.

—You're being very rude, Seamus said calmly while going closer to the crow, and pushing his head upwards and opening his wings.

—Well... I... I... you're very big, the crow feigned a smile. I didn't mean to be, I'm sure you understand. It's just that if the roof isn't shiny, then the sun won't reflect in it at dawn, and all the birds on the other side of the town won't know morning is here. They'll think it's still night-time.

—We're not here to scratch the roof, we only want to find out the name of this

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town, then we'll be off, von Gulp said. Now, if you were to help us, we'd leave even sooner.

— Now that you put it that way, the crow replied. I'll call my brother, he knows these things better than me, he's a surveillance bird.

— What's that? McPeck asked.

— That means he flies around over the streets and houses and watches what is going on.

— So he's noseey? Squeaky asked.

— No, that's just what he does, the crow said, then he started calling out: Croakley! Croakley!

Soon enough another crow came:

— I don't believe it, you actually have company! And they're all sitting on your precious roof! Are you not feeling well? Croakley asked.

— The only reason why I called you is that they won't go.

— Well, I do hope you don't actually expect me to chase them away! I'm a gentlebird, I don't do this sort of thing.

— No, no, I just want you to tell them the name of the town.

— You think that will make them leave? Croakley laughed. Oh, yeah, that will really scare them away, he laughed some more.

— That's what they're here for. Now, stop laughing, and stop moving around. You're...

— Scratching your shiny roof, and now, because of bad, gruesome me, the birds on the west side of the city will live in perpetual night. Yeah, yeah. See how good a brother I am? I can tell myself that, you don't even have to say a word! So why do you want to know the name? So you can tell all your friends where you've been? You want to boast, don't you? That's not very nice of you. How do you think your friends, who have never left their home town, will feel when you get back from all the places you've seen, from Africa and Egypt, and bring back dates and figs, and bananas and coconuts, and they don't even know how to eat them?

— Has Stouty the parrot come back from his cruise? the other crow asked Croakley.

— Yes... Croakley mumbled.

— Well, we won't do that!

— Won't you? That's what you say now, Croakley said.

— No, we won't do that, because we're not going back.

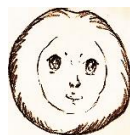
— Ever?





- Never.
 - Never mind. You can still write, Croakley nodded.
 - Whom would we tell? All my friends are coming with me, Attila said.
 - Mine, too, Munch agreed.
 - Isn't that a coincidence, Theo smiled.
 - If you're not going to boast about it, what are you travelling for? Croakley asked.
 - To get to the North, McPeck answered.
 - Will you boast when you get there?
 - I doubt it. Is it fun?
 - Boasting? Tons. Take me for example: a week ago, I saw a man stealing a cookie from old Mrs. Krieggler, and it dawned on me that I could take one, too, and no one would notice. I hurried towards the tray of freshly baked cookies and, just as I was about to take one, the man saw me, got scared, dropped his cookie and left. I told my brother all about it: how I scared away a man five times my size. And then I told the pigeon at the post office how I saw an old lady and scared off the man who was trying to steal her cookies. And then I told the sparrow at the library how I fought and chased a ferocious burglar away and saved a defenceless little old lady. And now I'm a hero!
 - But if they should all get together, it would be clear that you told each of them different stories.
 - And if they should all get together, do you really think they'd have nothing better to talk about than me? Anyway, I should get going now, I have a burglary in progress at the Museum.
 - Stealing the paints again from the workshops? his brother asked.
 - Yes, I just can't help myself. I love those bright colours. The name of the town is Mannheim. Good luck on your journey!
 - Mannheim... so we're not there yet... Wilfred III sighed.
 - Oh, yes, you are. That's exactly what's wrong with you: you're right here. On my roof, ruining my sunrises.
 - We're leaving now, thank you for your hospitality, Munch said.
- As we fly over the town, the night fades into morning and, slowly, the first bright red rays of the sun shine from beyond the houses. As the sun rises higher and higher, the roof of the concert hall shines brighter and brighter.
- Come on, lazy wings! Wake up, everyone!
- Voices come from down below. Sparrows and pigeons all hurry every which



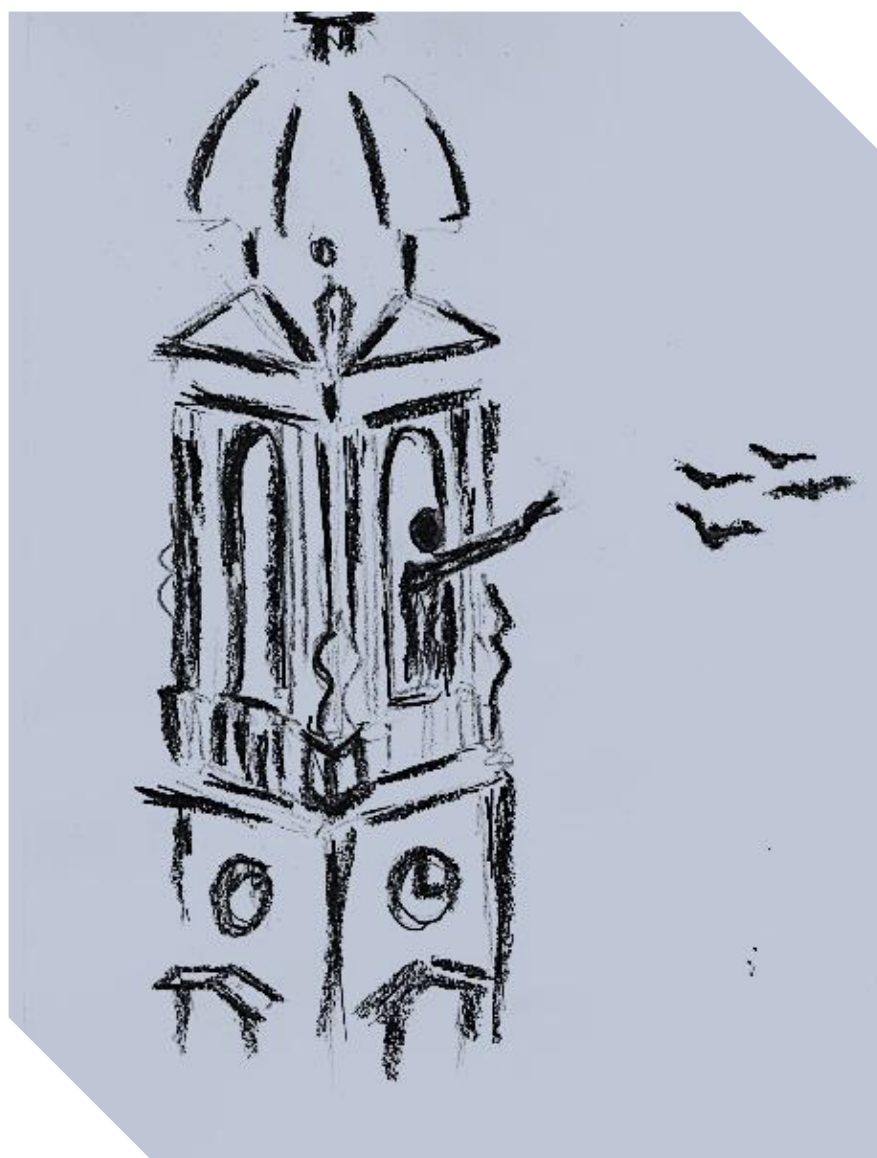


way.

— It's morning, McPeck said.

— It doesn't feel like morning yet, Munch said.

— Well, it is, and we had better find a place to rest, Theo said. Look: there is an empty castle just over the hill. I can see the tower.



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That turned out to be a castle after all, or rather what was left of it. It must have been huge when it was built, with a big guard tower looking over the river. Now that tower is gone, only the stairs are left. A spiral of stairs descending from what once existed straight into the river. As soon as we got in, everyone fell asleep. Almost everyone.

– Mr Whiskers? Vic? Are you awake? McPeck got up.

– Yes, McPeck, what is it? Mr Whiskers answered.

– Did you hear that?

– What?

– That... listen.

– It's just the wind. It comes in through the balcony window on the second floor, then goes down the stairs, through the hallway, and out again, through the windows of the ballroom on the first floor.

– But isn't it scared of wandering through the castle like that, all by itself?

– Who?

– The wind, of course.

– Oh, no, the wind isn't scared of anything.

– Really? Nothing? Not even ghosts?

– Ghosts? Don't be silly. Is that what you're afraid of, McPeck? Ghosts? Don't worry, if there are any in this old castle, I'm sure they rather appreciate the company. It must get awfully lonely around here. And, anyway, ghosts are a bit like us: they sleep during the day, too. So you can go back to sleep now, and don't give that a second thought. Go on, sweet dreams, Mr Whiskers said while he went over to McPeck, who sat down and tucked his little head into his chest. There you go, sleep tight little one, Mr Whiskers whispered while fluffing up McPeck's feathers.

The birds were all asleep. Squeaky was snoring very quietly, Sharpsey was resting her head on Attila's shoulder, Munch pushed his head against Seamus, and Seamus put his wing around him.

– I'm not at all tired, you know. In fact, I'd really love a stroll, to stretch my legs a little. What do you say, Vic? Mr Whiskers jumped up.

– Sure, let's go explore.

So down the cold stone floor we went. We were on the first floor of the castle. By this time, the sun had risen, and the bright light came into the hallway through a

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missing wall in the adjoining room. The room looked over the Rhine as it made its way among steep hills covered in forests.

— Tonight we leave the Rhine, soon we shall cross the sea, and we'll get to the North. We've come a long way, Mr Whiskers said.

— We still have a long way to go.

— It's nice to have a destination. When I was young, I used to dream of going to London. With the fog and the damp climate, it's heaven for mice. Then I got married and I dreamt of going there with my wife, then came the children, and I dreamt of taking them there. Then I woke up one day and London seemed far away. And then I met you.

Mr Whiskers stopped talking and put his paw around me.

We were just standing there, watching the sunlight reflecting over the water, when all of a sudden we heard something: a noise.

— Where did it come from?

— Up above I think. Let's go look. Come on, you said it yourself, any ghosts living here will be happy to see us. And besides, ghosts sleep during the day, remember?

— Well, this one seems to have insomnia.

Another loud noise followed.

— Come on, let's go see what it is before it wakes the others. Even if it is a ghost, what's so bad about that?

— It could be worse, you know. It could be alive, Mr Whiskers whispered. A wild animal, perhaps.

— On the second floor of a forgotten castle?

— Yes, a wild animal with wings. And sharp claws, and teeth. A dragon even.

— There is only one way to find out. Come on! I went ahead.

Mr Whiskers soon followed.

— The only reason I'm coming with you, Vic, is because I can't let you go alone. It could be dangerous... Oh, nooo! It's behind me! Help! It's got me!

— Shhh, it's just the wind, Mr Whiskers.

So up the stairs we went, passing one room after the next, but we couldn't see where the noise was coming from. And then there it went again.

— Up ahead, Mr Whiskers.

— Really, Vic, shouldn't we tell the others? I guess not... Wait for me, I'll defend you!

We went into the room whose wall was half missing, and, standing there...

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—Oh, I told you, Vic, I told you, you should have listened! Look! Big wings, sharp claws! I warned you! Run! Run!

The huge creature opened up its wings and then its beak, and then... coughed.

—Yes, run... I have a terrible cold. I certainly wouldn't want you to get it, too. And this cough... I knew I shouldn't have eaten all that ice-cream, but it was so good. And all those kids holding it up like that, they were practically giving it to me.

—You stole ice-cream from children? You really are a very bad dragon! Mr Whiskers said.

—I didn't really steal it. And I did them a favour after all. You wouldn't want little children to go around coughing like me, would you? You're just wrong. Absolutely wrong. Besides, I'm not a dragon, either.

—Aren't you? Prove it! I think you are. You have sharp claws and a sharp beak, and you upset children. You meet all the requirements.

—But I don't breathe fire.

—Of course not. You have a cold.

—I'm not a dragon, really. Flattering as that may be, I'm just a falcon.

—Just a falcon? That's quite enough. Are you a bad falcon?

—The absolute worst.

—Mean?

—Through and through.

—Nasty?

—Most definitely. I really am as bad as they come. Now that you know a little about me, how do you do, my name is Mozart.

—I'm Vic and this is Mr Whiskers.

—Is that a normal falcon name? Mr Whiskers asked.

—No, not quite. You see, Mozart was a great composer. He started composing and playing the piano when he was just a little child. All my childhood I was absolutely positive I would grow up to be a nightingale. So, while my brothers went out to hunt, I'd stay in the nest and sing. It horrified my parents.

—Why? Were you bad at it?

—No, quite the contrary, that's what scared them, that I sang quite nicely. They always wondered if a nightingale had not slipped one of its eggs into their nest. But then I grew up, I got the sharp beak, I grew big, at least I look like a falcon now. And whenever we go to family reunions and I sing, at least now it's obvious what kind of a bird I am, they don't have to reassure everyone any more.

—Do you still sing?

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—Of course, when I have a voice. It's hard to sing with a bad cold. I was to have sung tonight at the old waterway in Maine.

—What is that, a waterway?

—Some people built it long ago. It was a road made for water only. This way they could bring water from the river to the city. Romans, that's what they were. Strange things, these people... so many species of them...

—Is that city farther up on the Rhine?

—Technically it sits over two rivers, but, yes, if you follow the Rhine, you'll reach it.

—That must be where we're going, then.

—What will you do there?

—Just pass through. Or rather over.

—You're going to a city only just to fly over it?

—It's not our final destination. We're going to the North.

—To fly over it, as well?

—No, that's where I'll grow into a chestnut tree.

—I see. I've never been that far. I've only terrorised local children. It's a bad habit, I know, but I'm trying to quit. Only one child a day now, Mozart chuckled, but then he coughed again. Oh, dear... I don't like being sick, he said while sitting down and pouting.

—Whenever I was sick, I would always tell my mummy, and she'd make it better. Always, McPeck said as he straddled into the room.

He couldn't quite keep his eyes open, he had barely got up.

—Hello, who are you, poor sick bird? I'm McPeck.

—Mozart. And my mummy would be ecstatic to see me like this. She would only want this cold to last until our next family dinner. This way she wouldn't have to reassure uncle Adolf that I am a pure breed falcon, that she never left the nest until we hatched, and no birds ever got near it, Mozart said, then coughed again.

—We should ask Theo what to do. He'll know. He helped von Gulp see, McPeck suggested. I'll go get him, he said, then straddled off again.

Soon everyone was there.

—A falcon? We must be out of our minds. Falcons are mean and evil. They hunt and they have sharp beaks, we could hear Munch's voice.

He was trying to stop the others, and walked backwards into the room.

—They're gruesome and ferocious, he kept walking backwards until he bumped into Mozart.





Then he stopped and turned around.

– Boo! Mozart whispered.

Munch took a few steps back and shook his tail.

– You’re the falcon? This is it? You’re not so scary.

– Oh, no? Mozart lifted himself up into the air.

He flew just above our heads, and began to make a loud high-pitched noise, but just then he started to cough again and landed and sighed:

– You’re right, I guess I’m not so scary after all.

– Oh, don’t be sad, you’ll be scary again, just as soon as your cough goes away, McPeck went over to Mozart and patted him.

Theo and the others took a step back.

– We can’t leave him alone like that, poor chap. We really should do something, Wilfred III said.

– But what? We might need a doctor. When I was little and I had a cold, mummy brought the beaver over to have a look at me. He said she should give me chamomile tea. Horrible creatures, beavers. I think they must really dislike owls, otherwise he wouldn’t have suggested such a disgusting tea: chamomile. I’ll never forget it. We can’t give him that, it’s too horrible. And if the local doctor is a beaver, on second thought, he would be better off without him, Wilfred II concluded.

– I know! Cough syrup! Theo said. I once found a bottle of it. I didn’t really know what it was, and I drank it all. It made me very dizzy, but it worked, I haven’t coughed since.

– Where do we get that?

– In a pharmacy. People make it.

– Where will we find a pharmacy? Attila asked.

– In the city. All we have to do is look for a shop with shelves full of jars and bottles. It usually smells quite bad, too, Theo said.

– Then it shouldn’t be very hard to find. Come on, let’s go, Attila called out.

– We can’t all go, someone has to stay here with him, the poor dear. I’ll stay, Sharpsey said.

– But won’t you be afraid here by yourself? Munch asked.

– I’ll keep her safe, don’t worry, McPeck said.

– She’s in safe hands now. Come on, Wilfred I whispered.

So back to the city we flew, not very sure where to look... And then we thought of the roof. The crow must still be there. We soon reached it.

– Hello! Excuse me, is anyone here? Attila asked.





—No! the crow answered.

—I guess the crow must have left, Munch said.

Attila frowned a little.

—Well, then, if there isn't anyone here, that means we can all safely land on this shiny roof and no one will mind, von Gulp spoke loudly.

—Don't even think about it! Why are you back? the crow came out.

—You remembered us. How nice, Seamus smiled.

—We need to find a pharmacy. Do you know one?

—No, but I can tell you there isn't one on this roof! So keep away!

—Will you please help us find one? Our friend isn't feeling very well. He has a terrible cough, and it prevents him from singing, Squeaky asked.

—A singing bird, eigh? Well, all right. It's a good thing he's not a falcon or a hawk. I might have hesitated then.

—Actually... Squeaky began saying, but was stopped by Wilfred III, who whispered to him:

—Shhh, you don't need to explain, you only said he sang, you never mentioned what kind of bird he was, so you didn't lie. And if this crow is too narrow-minded to imagine that falcons can sing, it's his loss.

—Croakley! the crow called out, and soon his brother came.

His feathers were colourful: red, and blue, and yellow.

—I've been to the museum, Croakley said happily.

—Obviously, his brother exclaimed.

—Well... you again? Have you told all your friends about the city you've seen? Is that why you've returned?

—No. We're looking for a pharmacy. We have a sick friend.

—Oh, dear... Sorry. I do get ahead of myself sometimes. I don't really mean anything by it, though. I do feel bad now. I know one, or at least I think that's what it is. Come on, follow me! and Croakley led the way over the narrow streets.

It was getting dark already.

—Perhaps we can also find something to eat there, Squeaky said.

—Oh, yes, pharmacies are full of crunchy things to eat, but I strongly advise you against it. I once tried a tablet, and besides the fact that it had a horrible taste, it gave me the worst tummy ache ever. Be careful... Ah, here we are.

We landed in front of a shop with large windows. Somebody came out, a fat man, and before the door closed, we all sneaked in and hid behind a counter. The shop was quite full.





– May I help you?

A little white mouse came up to us: very serious, no trace of a smile. If anything, he looked bored.

– Yes, we're looking for cough syrup.

– One moment please, the mouse calmly walked towards a man in a white robe behind the counter, he got on the counter, then jumped on a shelf behind the man, and started throwing down little bottles:

– No, not this one. Not this one, no, no...

The man turned:

– *"No! Mice again! Go away, leave my medicines alone!"*, he chased the mouse away.

The little white mouse returned carrying a bottle:

– Here you go.

– But this is castor oil. Look, it says so right here, Theo showed him.

– It does? I really do need new glasses. Excuse me, again.

The mouse went off once more.

– *"You again! I'll show you! Get him, Fritz!"*, the man called to a big brown cat who ran straight for the mouse, caught him, then came with him towards us.

– All right, you can put me down now, Fritz. Thank you. There you go, the mouse said, and gave the cat a little white pill.

– What was that? Munch asked.

– A sugar pill, the mouse answered.

– What does it do? von Gulp asked.

– Anything you want it to. Fritz believes they're going to turn her into a tiger.

– You shouldn't do that, you shouldn't give her false hopes. That's not right.

– Why not? It hasn't been scientifically proven they can't do that. Here is your syrup. I hope it helps.

– Thank you, you've been very helpful indeed, Theo said.

– So, now that we've got the medicine, we can focus on breakfast, Squeaky said as we left the pharmacy.

– I know the perfect place, Croakley said. Follow me!

And so we did, down little dark streets, until we reached a little entrance: the back entrance to a bakery. Croakley knocked with his beak on the window:

– Surveillance here.

A huge rat opened the window.

– Evening, Croakley! What can I do for you?

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—My friends would like something to eat. Has the baker closed shop for tonight?

—Yes, he has, and he has prepared two ovenfuls to bake first thing in the morning. I'll turn the oven on. It won't take long. Fresh pastries and rolls coming up!

—Won't the baker mind? Wilfred I asked.

—No, he'll think he forgot to make them again. Come on in.

The rat pushed a couple of trays into the oven, and turned the knob. We stood in front of the shelves lined with table cloth. The scent of baking bread filled the store. A little clock rang and the rat returned, opened the oven door, and let it cool.

—Please, help yourselves. Take a basket. Good appetite.

—Thank you, Wilfred I said, and we filled a basket with all sorts of little breads, rolls, and pastries.

—I have to get back to my job now, you understand. A lot of responsibility. Good luck! Croakley said as we flew out.

And we headed back for the castle.

Before we had actually reached it, we could hear Mozart's cough.

—Here we are, and here's the syrup. Drink up, Theo said as he handed Mozart the bottle and put the basket down.

The rolls were still hot, everyone helped themselves.

—I've never had anything like this before, Mozart said. You really know how to live in style.

—Well, you'll be better now, and it is getting quite dark... Theo said.

—Yes, and we are nightcreatures, McPeck went on.

—So, we should get going soon, Wilfred I said.

—How are you feeling? Wilfred II asked Mozart.

—Much better, really. Thank you.

—Yes... Well, it is night-time.

—Yes, and you should go, Mozart said.

—Yes... It was very nice meeting you, Theo said.

—You, too. You, too.

—So, we'll just go now.

—Fly safe!

—Goodbye, then.

—Oh, and thank you for the rolls, they were delicious.

—We're very glad you liked them.

—Goodbye, Mozart waved.

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– So long!
 – And the pastries were very tasty, too!
 – Yes, that was a really nice rat, wasn't he?
 – Are we going already? Munch asked.
 – Yes, it is getting quite late. Goodbye...
 And so we left the room and went outside the castle.
 – Bye, Mozart, hope you feel better soon, McPeck called out.
 Mozart coughed.
 – Why are we so mean? McPeck asked.
 – What do you mean? Theo asked McPeck.
 – We're leaving him there all alone, and there are so many of us, I think he thought... Well, I thought so, too. Didn't you?
 – Thought what? Theo asked.
 – I mean I still do.
 – Me, too, Munch said.
 – What exactly is it you all do? Theo asked Munch.
 – I thought so, too.
 – Thought what?
 – What McPeck said.
 – He didn't.
 – I did, McPeck spoke firmly.
 – I agree, Munch nodded.
 – Do you know? Theo turned to the owls.
 – I have to say, it did seem rather imminent, Wilfred III said.
 – Obvious, even, Wilfred II added.
 – I just assumed, Wilfred I explained.
 – What about you? Theo turned to von Gulp.
 – Me, too.
 – Will someone let me know? Theo exclaimed, and Attila gently pushed him towards the balcony.

Through the window he could see the rays of the moon lighting up the cold room. And there, in the moonlight, coughing a little bit every once in a while, and taking frequent deep breaths, with his eyes fixed on the floor, Mozart sat and quietly nibbled at a roll.

– I see... I have been rather dense, I must admit, Theo said in a low voice.
 Squeaky came up next to him and nodded fervently:

C O N T E M P O R A R Y
 L I T E R A T U R E P R E S S





—I agree!

Theo frowned at Squeaky a little, then went back into the room.

—How are you feeling?

—Fine, fine, thank you for asking, Mozart smiled.

—I've been thinking, and everyone agrees that it might be best if you came with us, Theo spoke, always looking down, not noticing how Mozart started nodding.

—I mean to say it would be easier to keep an eye on you this way, make sure you're getting better.

Mozart was nodding more and more, so fast we wondered if he was not getting a headache.

—If you want to, of course, but we'd really like for you to come. And we'd get you as many rolls as you wanted, till you got better.

Suddenly, Mozart leaped up and jumped and threw his wings around Theo and gave him a big hug. So big that he knocked Theo over.

—He's coming! He's coming! McPeck called out in excitement.

—Yes, I think he is, Theo agreed and smiled.

—So, where are we off to? Mozart asked.

—Castrum Moguntiacum, a Roman city.

—Romans? But there haven't been any Romans around here for ages. I've never seen any. I'm afraid you may have been misinformed.

—They could be hiding. Or our map might be a bit out of date. It's from the year 400 AD. We're bringing it up to date.

—I see. It seems quite accurate to me: the rivers are in their right place. It can't be all that old, Mozart said after looking at the map.

—Will your family miss you if you come with us?

—Uncle Adolf for sure. He'll have to start checking the bulletin. The weather was all he talked about, besides my singing.

—What about your friends?

—The pigeons and I were never really that close.

—Don't you have any falcon friends?

—Not really, they don't know how to listen. Pigeons are much better listeners.

—What about your mummy?

—Without me to worry about, she can finally start focusing on my brothers. She has never got a chance to tell everyone about them so far. She was always talking about me.

—And your brothers?

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– They always said I was the reason they couldn't make a good match. Every time they met the parents of the falconettes they wanted to propose to, and spoke of me, they were turned down. They must have been afraid my singing would be genetic.

– What did you do all day?

– Play with children. They're awfully fun. Especially little babies. Strange creatures, people. As they grow up, they forget how to listen, but when they're really little, they understand. A few years ago a mother put a baby on a bench in a park and, absent minded as she was, she forgot him there. Seeing him all alone, I went over to keep him company. He was so upset, the poor thing, always complaining how no one ever paid any attention to him. So I sat next to him and he began to tell me all the things the dog had told him, and how the sparrows came and asked him for a biscuit, and how the parrot kept screaming all day that he wanted out of his cage, but when he opened the door and let him out, the crazy parrot started yelling he wanted back in. Poor baby, such a tough kid. His mother must have realized she was missing something, because she came back to get him. I saw him again a few days ago and went over to say 'hello', but I don't think he understood a word I said. He even threw a rock at me, and I don't think he meant it to be a present. And between us, he wasn't that nice to his dog, either. The poor four-legged creature kept bringing the kid sticks to keep him busy, but all the kid could think of doing with them was to throw them away again. It's really too bad. Most species get smarter as they get older.

– Your cold is better, you haven't coughed at all, McPeck said happily.

– Yes, it is. I feel quite well, in fact. That syrup worked wonders.

– Indeed, Seamus smiled. At the Zoo I used to get sore throats all the time, particularly when they organized celebrations and wanted us to play a part. Then one day they started giving shots to birds who got sick, and I never got sick again since.

– Since I'm feeling well, perhaps I'll be able to sing at the old waterway after all. It's on our way. What do you say?

– I don't see why not, Theo answered, and everyone agreed.

– Great! I'd hate to disappoint those who are waiting for me.

– Is the city far away? Wilfred II asked.

– It depends.

– What do you mean?

– If you're flying alone, it's very far away, but if you've got company, it's quite close.

– Do you fly there often?

– Once a week. It's nice to have a routine, it keeps you busy: one child a day,

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one trip a week.

– Did you go there alone?

– Both there and back.

– What did you do along the way?

– I sang.

– What songs do you sing?

– All sorts. Songs I heard at the Opera, songs I heard children sing. I even compose one every once in a while.

– Do many birds come to listen to you?

– Oh, yes, the stones of the waterway are completely covered with birds by the time I stop singing.

A new city appeared before us, and, as we followed the river, we came to a bend where another river started.

– This is it, Castrum Moguntiacum. We turn right here, Wilfred I said.

– But first we will stop at the waterway, of course, von Gulp said. Lead the way, Mozart.

We followed Mozart half way across the city, to a quiet, dark area. No one was there, just a few heaps of stones.

– This is it? Where did all the water go? Wilfred II asked.

– Up there, Mozart pointed to the heaps of stones. That's where it used to pass, over the stones.

– Clever people, these Romans. First they build bridges over water, then they bring water over the bridge.

– Where is everyone? Wilfred III asked, but he had hardly had the time to finish his question when Mozart closed his eyes and started singing.

We sat around him and listened to him sing cheerful and sad songs, arias and limericks. And with each song he sang, more and more birds gathered. Doves and pigeons, sparrows, swallows, even a woodpecker. When he stopped singing, Mozart opened his eyes and everywhere on the ground there were birds flapping their wings as a sign of appreciation. He bowed his head. One by one, the birds waved and left, disappearing into the night.

– Why do you close your eyes when you sing? von Gulp asked.

– Because I have stage fright. If I see all these birds around me, I won't be able to utter a sound, but if I don't know they're there, then I can sing.

– You sing beautifully, McPeck said.

– Thank you, Mozart smiled.

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– Why do you come here only once a week?

– Well, if I came every day, it wouldn't be special, it would be something expected. It's better to leave a little room for the others to miss you, to keep them from growing weary.

– They'll miss you next week, won't they?

– I don't know. It would be nice to know they would. You see, only someone who noticed you could miss you, and it is nice to be noticed.

– Have you ever missed anyone? Munch asked.

– Yes, I have.

– Then you should realize how mean you are. It's one thing to miss someone and then see them, but their missing you will be in vain. They'll keep hoping to hear you every week, they'll wonder what new songs you'll bring when you come, if you'll be late, what you'll say. And then they'll get a little upset that they put everything off just to listen to you, and you did not come. Then they'd get angry. Then they'd begin to worry if something has happened to you, and they'll feel guilty for having been angry. And then time will pass, and slowly they'll forget they ever heard you, at least until they hear a child singing the same song you sang, and it will all come back to them, and they'll be left wondering. And that's the hardest thing to forget. You can easily forget something you know, but things you only wonder about stay with you. And then, whenever you fly over a village and hear a "Quack", it almost sounds familiar, and then you see a yellow tail and two flat orange feet... but then she turns around and it's not her...

– What was her name? Attila asked.

– Cassandra. She lived with a human family, in a small village close to where I grew up. When she was just a duckling, the little girl took her into the house and took care of her, put a red ribbon around her fuzzy neck. She walked around so proudly. When she grew older, they sent her to live with the chickens. We met at the pond every day. I'd swim by her side, and she'd pretend not to notice me. One day I wanted to get her a present. I looked for it for some time, and I was late. All the other ducks had gone home by the time I got there. I was sure she had gone home, too, and just floated on the pond, not knowing where I was going. And when I lifted my head, there she was, with her head tucked in. It was evening, and the water was getting cold. She was shivering a little. I rushed to her, half swimming, half flying. I had a bright red velvet ribbon for her, and I put it around her neck. We stayed out late into the night, just floating together, looking at the stars. She never said she was waiting for me, I never told her I'd spent my day looking for the ribbon. Soon after that, it snowed

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and the pond froze. Then came Christmas. I found another ribbon for her, and went over to give it to her. I waited and waited for her to come out on Christmas day, but all I could see were the chickens, and they don't know the time of day, can't even answer a simple question. I could see people gathering in the house for dinner, then, all of a sudden, the little girl ran out crying: *"How could you! She was my friend and you..."* She went to the pond. I could see she was holding the velvet ribbon I had got Cassandra. I guess she must have finally learnt how to fly and flown away.

— At least you had the chance to give her the ribbon and she wore it and liked it. At least you know she waited for you on the pond, Wilfred IV said.

— And even if she doesn't still have the ribbon, you've given it to her, and she had it for a while, and nothing can change that, Squeaky said. I remember one Christmas Eve I borrowed a little soldier from a Christmas Tree. It was so nice and shiny, and it wore a bright red uniform and a tall hat. I flew around with it. I was so proud. And then a bigger bat came and snatched it away from me, and accidentally dropped it in a camp fire. It melted very fast. But I had held it in my own two hands.

— But I never had the chance to give her this, Munch said, and got out a little red ribbon, embroidered with gold thread, which spelled: Casandra.

— Well, maybe that's not such a bad thing. Look: you misspelled her name, it should have a double "s", Theo said.

— I didn't do it myself, I took it to a mouse who lived in a tailor's shop. You're right...

— Don't worry, we'll have it fixed. We'll add another "s", so, when you see her again, you can give it to her, Attila said.

— Actually... I don't think she'll mind that much. It's just an "s". All the other letters are there.

— I see your point, though, Mozart said. I'll leave a note to let them know not to expect me from now on. He took a sharp little rock and scratched on a bigger rock: 'Concerts suspended indefinitely. Away with friends'.

— Well, now that we've got that out of the way, we should go. We still have a long way ahead of us, Wilfred I said. We should reach Franconofurt tonight, it's not very far away.

— Whom have you missed? Munch asked Mozart.

— It doesn't really matter any more, it was a long time ago.

— If you still remember it, it matters.

— Her name was Eloise.

— Did she go away, too?

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— More or less. She ran off with a tomcat.
 — Oh, dear... you mean a cat got her? Poor thing.
 — More or less.
 — Didn't she see him? Couldn't she fly?
 — Obviously, she saw him. And no, she couldn't fly. She could jump very well, though. Had no problem whatsoever going up and down trees.
 — What kind of bird jumps? Munch asked.
 — I don't know.
 — But you said she jumped.
 — Yes, but I never said she was a bird.
 A moment of silence followed.
 — Well, what was she? Wilfred II asked.
 — A cat, obviously.
 — How do you go about meeting a cat? Seamus asked. I mean, it's not as if you fly in the same circles.

— Quite simple, really. Her owners were on a picnic and brought her along. They also had a little boy who was running around with a lollypop in his hand, just inviting me to take it. And so I did. She came after me, and we sat and chatted for a while, then she went back to her owners, the boy with the lollypop. They rewarded her by giving her milk. She always had rather strange tastes when it came to food. And then I followed her home. She was a Siamese cat. Every night she'd climb on the roof and we'd sing together. Then we'd take a spin through the neighbourhood, me flying and her jumping from roof to roof. Then she met the tomcat. I really don't know what she saw in him: a messy ball of fur, spitting every time he had a chance to. Very rude.

— It may have turned out for the best, though, McPeck said. I don't see how she could have come with us anyway.

— Yes, you're right, Mozart smiled.
 — Look above! A big bird with red eyes!
 — We've seen it before. It carries people, Wilfred III remembered.
 — Haven't they spread enough on land? Now they're coming up here, too..., von Gulp mumbled.

— Look, another one. Over there. And another.
 — They're all going down. The city must be close.
 — See how many lights there are, up ahead? What is it? Let's go see!
 — Hey, wait! Watch out for the big birds! Wait, maybe it's not such a good idea,

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they.... Wait, wait! Wait for me at least, Munch called out.

All the big birds landed on streets that were very brightly lit, then stopped in front of a big building.

– Stop right there! This is traffic control! You weren't scheduled to be here tonight, a funny looking bird came up to us.

– Well... it is true, we are a little behind, Wilfred I said.

– Unacceptable. We respect our schedule here. Sorry, but we can't allow you to land.

– Who's "we"?

– The airport and me, of course.

– Just you?

– And the airport. There would be havoc here if it weren't for me. It's a tough job keeping all those birds away from the airplanes.

– We don't really want to land here, anyway, we're just passing through.

– You don't want to land here? This is Frankfurt International Airport, and you don't want to land here?

– What difference does it make. Even if we wanted to, you wouldn't let us, Munch said.

– You have a point, the strange bird replied. But now that you're here, the least I can do is get you some crackers and peanuts. One second.

The bird flew into an airplane that had just arrived. We could see him opening a cupboard and going in. When he came back out, he was carrying lots of little packages. He got out just in time, too, before two women came in:

– *"I just can't believe it! Someone has gone into the cupboards again!"*

– *"These passengers... What is it about these peanuts that drives them crazy?"*

– Here, for you. But take care, they're a little salty. Come on, I'll show you out.

This is a big airport, and you could easily get lost.

So we followed the bird all the way across:

– This is it, it's as far as I can go! Have a safe flight! Goodbye!

We could see the whole city in front of us.

– Franconofurt. After this, we'll reach Thüringer Forest, Wilfred I said.

– These peanuts are yummy, McPeck said.

– Come on, let's fly a little further tonight, Theo suggested.

Once again we were flying over the river when a little boat passed underneath.

Two men were on deck:

– *"Hans, can you get me a cup of coffee?"*

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- “Sure, your majesty. Anything you say, your highness.”
 - “What did you say?”
 - “In a minute.”
 - Oh, dear..., Squeaky sighed.
 - What?
 - I dropped a peanut.
 - That’s all right. Here, have one of mine, Mozart offered.
 - It fell.
 - Strange thing, isn’t it, Seamus laughed.
 - No, it’s just that it fell into that cup in the man’s hand.
 - “Here you go, your coffee.”
 - “Thank you... Hans! Hans!”
 - “Not enough sugar?”
 - “No, that’s not it...”
 - “Too much sugar?”
 - “No, actually... it’s very good. What did you do?”
 - “What do you mean?”
 - “It has an excellent flavour. Really, very nice. Thank you, Hans.”
 - “You’re welcome...”
 - “You know what? I’m going to go enjoy my coffee in my quarters. Take over for me. You’ll be my second in command now.”
 - “Really? I mean, thank you.”
 - No harm done there. Good job, Squeaky chap, Wilfred IV said.
- We quickly finished all the peanuts, and left the city behind. The river turned a little and we went on following it.
- I see on this map we’ll be reaching Hadrian’s Wall soon.
 - What is that?
 - I don’t really know. A wall I presume. One that belongs to Hadrian.
 - Why would he want a wall?
 - Perhaps he just wanted something of his own, something that belonged to him. It was his wall, and whenever he felt like it, he could go see it. So, if we find it, we’ll rest there.
- The river flowed quietly, and we flew beside it. A bend or two later, we saw something on the ground.
- Look there, it looks like someone drew a line, von Gulp noticed.
 - That must be the wall, Theo said.





— That? Well... Hadrian didn't go to very much trouble to build this. It's low enough for a snake to jump over.

— It doesn't matter how tall it was. It was a wall, and everyone knew that, and they didn't cross it, Wilfred II answered.

— Why not, if they could?

— Because they knew it was a wall.

— Yes, but they could.

— Yes, but it was the principle of the thing.

— And it must have been taller, Theo said. The wind and rain probably knocked the stones over.

— Let's sit, Squeaky suggested, and so we did.

We found a good place in the tall grass, sheltered on one side by the wall.

— Finally, it's been..., but Squeaky's head dropped before he could finish the sentence and he began to snore.

All the birds tucked their heads into their feathers and we all stood close for warmth. The nights are getting chillier and chillier. Everyone was half asleep when McPeck got up, and sleepily walked over to Mozart, who had seated himself far from the group. McPeck got closer and closer to him, pushed his little beak into Mozart's feathers, and started pushing Mozart, who moved slowly, one step at a time, towards the group, until he was right in the middle. Just as Mozart was falling asleep, Squeaky rolled over, put his head on Mozart's shoulder, and arranged it so that he would be comfortable. Mozart looked to his right, at Squeaky, then to his left, at McPeck, then all around, and finally fell asleep.





PART IV

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The day passed faster than usual. Everyone got up at dusk, stretched their wings, and took a few steps. The only one still sleeping was Mozart. Munch walked over to him:

– Psst, time to get up, he whispered, but Mozart went on sleeping. Up, up and away...

Seeing that didn't work, Munch resorted to drastic measures: he slowly raised his right wing and gently poked Mozart... Nothing... He poked him again. Mozart opened one eye, Munch walked away. Then he opened the other one. He got up as if he had woken up on his own:

– You are really here, all of you...

– Why wouldn't we be? Von Gulp asked.

Mozart smiled.

– Did you sleep well? Munch asked.

– Yes, very, thank you.

– Come on, we should have a good breakfast, we have a long night ahead of us, Wilfred I said.

– Tonight we cross the Thüringer Forest.

– What is it like? McPeck asked.

– It's a forest just like any other forest, Wilfred II replied.

– Well... no, Mozart said. I've heard stories about this forest. Two men, the Grimm brothers, told them. They didn't make them up, though, so they must be real. The stories spoke of witches and fairies living in the forest, and elves and trolls. It's a magical forest.

– All we have to do is follow the river to its next bend, then we'll reach the forest, Wilfred I said.

As soon as we had had our breakfast of fish and berries, we were off. No one said a word. We were all trying to catch a glimpse of the forest as soon as it came into sight. Soon we reached the bend in the river.

– Well, this is it. It's over the forest from here. Everyone, stay close together.

The forest was like all the others we'd seen, but for some reason it seemed darker than usual. Every little sound from below seemed louder. Suddenly, we heard a long "Aooooo."

– What's that? Munch asked.

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- A wolf, Theo answered.
And then it went again: “Aooooo”, longer this time.
- What’s wrong with it? Do you think he’s in pain? McPeck asked.
- No, that’s just how they let each other know where they are, Theo answered.
They usually travel in groups. Very sociable creatures.
- I’ve never seen a wolf before, McPeck said.
- Yes, exactly, that’s why you’re here with us now, Munch answered.
- Can’t we fly just a little lower, so I can take a quick look?
- Are you feeling a little depressed, McPeck? Munch asked him. Do you want to feed the nice wolf? You’d make a wonderful hors d’oeuvre, I’m sure.
- It won’t do any harm if we’re up here and he’s down there, Seamus said.
- All right, but just a little lower, Theo agreed.
We flew just over the bushes, right under the branches.
- Where did he go? McPeck asked.
- This is too quiet. Let’s go back higher up. Suppose he had climbed a tree and was getting ready to jump on us. Come on, wolves are fierce, blood-shedding predators, they’re...
- And there it went again, from right underneath the tree we were next to.
“Aooo, Aooo”, really short and interrupted by sobs.
- He’s crying, Sharpsey said.
- Poor fierce, blood-shedding predator wolf... McPeck said. Why is he crying?
- I don’t know, maybe he hasn’t had dinner yet, Munch answered.
- Hello, Mr Fierce blood-shedding wolf! McPeck called out.
- Hello, the wolf looked up and answered in between sobs.
- Why are you crying?
- I was playing hide-and-seek with friends, and they told me to run until I reached the river, and they’d come and get me, but they haven’t, and they won’t answer my calls, and I want to go home, and I, I... I want my mummy! the wolf started crying bitterly.
- Don’t worry, McPeck flew down next to him, and wiped his tears. We’re here now.
- Yeah, believe me, he knows that. I can hear his stomach gurgling from all the way up here, Munch said.
- We’ll help you get back to your mummy, McPeck went on.
- Sure, sure, and then we’ll even serve ourselves, voluntarily, holding an apple in our beaks. We’ll even pluck ourselves clean, lest our feathers should inconvenience





their digestion, Munch said.

— Oh, we don't eat birds, the wolf said.

— You say it as if eating birds is some degrading, low, vile, disgusting thing. I'll have you know birds are excellent. Not that you should ever try them, just take my word for it. And, anyway, you wouldn't really tell us if you did, would you. Wolves are shrewd, Munch said, and nodded.

The wolf started crying again.

— Come on, there, there, I didn't mean to upset you, Munch said. I'm sure you're a very nice wolf, in your own sort of way. What's your name?

— Fang.

— Now that's a cuddly name. Why do they call you that?

— Because I have only one fang. My older brother has three, they call him Three Fangs. I wish he were here.

— I wouldn't mind his being here, it's his fangs I'd probably have a problem with. So, where do you live? We have to know that if we're going to take you home.

Fang shrugged his shoulders.

— Is there anything near your home we could use as a landmark?

— There's a river.

— Well, then, you might be closer to home than you think.

— Two, actually. They unite further down.

— I don't think he's talking about this river. Look: two rivers. You poor little thing, you ran clear across the forest, Wilfred I said. We'll guide you back. That's where we're headed, too.

— Really? You will? Thank you. And mummy will be really happy to meet you, too, I'm sure.

— Yeah, I'm just as sure. Meet us, smell us, taste us...

— Enough, Munch, really, he's just a little cub.

— You call that little?

Attila frowned at him.

— Come on, little one, follow us and we'll lead you home, Seamus said.

Off we went, we in the air, Fang on the ground.

— Why did you run this far? McPeck asked Fang.

— It was part of the game.

— It wasn't very nice of your friends to leave you alone in the forest at night.

— We only go out at night.

— Really? So you're nightcreatures, too. Just like us. But it still wasn't nice of

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them... You should have turned back when you realized you were alone.

—Then they would have called me a coward. They're always calling me that. One time we went out, and there was an injured deer. They wanted me to bite it, but I just wouldn't. You should never upset a hurt animal. So they called me a coward. Then there was the time when a lamb got lost. I found him and took him back to his parents. They said I was a coward, I didn't have the courage to eat him. But I wasn't hungry anyway...

—I hope you still feel that way. Not hungry, I mean, Munch said, but stopped when his eyes met Attila's angry eyes.

—Hey! Look what I found! Fang called out.

—What? What? von Gulp jumped.

—A porcupine! And he's all rolled up, too. Catch! Fang said as he threw the porcupine at von Gulp.

—No, no! Don't catch! Theo screamed, but it was too late, von Gulp couldn't get out of the way, and he tried to catch it with his claws.

—Ooooh... von Gulp sighed. Auch, auch, auch, auch, oh, oh, oh... you little, you..., you...

—I told you, I tried to warn you, Munch said.

—You're... you're... you're on my list! von Gulp called out.

—Oh, dear, Wilfred IV said.

—What list? Fang asked.

—You don't want to know, Wilfred II answered.

—List of vengeance, von Gulp told him.

—That sounds serious.

—It is.

—Well, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to upset you. It's just that porcupines are such fun to play with. I didn't mean anything by it.

—All right.

—So you're not upset any more?

—No.

—So everything is fine, then.

—Not quite.

—Why not?

—Once someone gets on my list, it's beyond my control.

—Oh, I see, Fang said while looking down.

—Let's not worry about that, let's just get you home, Wilfred I said, and we

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started off again, but we were all very quiet, jumping up at the slightest noise. Hours passed, and we had almost crossed the forest.

—See, you worried for nothing. We're almost out of the forest. You and your silly list, Attila said, but all of a sudden a car came out of nowhere, down a dirt road, and stopped right in front of Fang. Two men came out:

—*"A wolf!"*

—*"Yes, but he's not that one, he's too little."*

—*"Who else saw the wolf who killed those chickens besides us?"*

—*"Uh... no one."*

—*"Right, and we're not going to tell how big or small he was, are we? We'll take this one back to the mayor, and we'll get our reward. Come on, get him!"*

The two men dashed at Fang, caught him, threw him in the back of the car, and got back in themselves.

—You were saying? von Gulp turned to Attila.

—Really, this is hardly the time to gloat. Sometimes I wonder if you want to make new friends, or just meet new animals you can get revenge on.

—That was mean! McPeck told von Gulp.

—Come on, there isn't any time for this. We have to follow that car! Theo said.

The car stopped outside a house. They took Fang out, and went in. We waited outside, next to a window. Soon, the two men walked into the room.

—*"He's in the garage. All locked up."*

—*"Good. We'll take him in first thing in the morning. The dogs will keep him company until then."*

—Did you hear that? We have to find the garage, Seamus said.

We went all around the house, and found a second door. A little window was slightly open. We went in, but just as we all got in, it closed. We saw Fang on the floor, with his muzzle on his paws.

—Are you all right? McPeck asked him.

He just sighed.

—We'll get you out of here, don't worry.

He sighed again.

We all gathered in one corner of the room to decide just how to get him out.

—We could break the door down, Munch suggested.

—It's an awfully big door, Squeaky said.

—We could try to open that window again, Sharpsey said.

—Sure we could... but how would we get Fang to fly out of here? Wilfred II





asked.

– What's that smell? Munch asked.

– I don't know. Something furry, Theo answered.

– A badger, maybe.

– No... It's something else... I know, I know: a dog!

– Actually, everyone, perhaps you should turn around. Not just one of them...

We were surrounded. There were four huge hounds growling and showing their teeth.

– Easy, boys, we just dropped in to say 'hello' to our friend there, Munch pointed at Fang, but quickly drew his wing back, just as one of the dogs tried to bite it, and snapped one of his feathers.

– They don't seem to appreciate our company, Munch said.

The dogs got closer and closer, and we got closer and closer together and to the wall.

Suddenly Fang jumped up and turned around:

– You leave my friends alone! Touch one feather, and I'll have you all for breakfast! he called out as he stood on all fours.

His sharp white fang glistened, the fur on his back stood on end. He was growling and lifting his upper lip. He suddenly leapt forward at one of the dogs. The dog tried to bite him, but Fang grabbed him by the back of his neck and shook him. The dog stepped back. Another one attacked Fang, but Fang growled really loud right at him, and the dog withdrew. Then he turned to the next dog, and that one took a few steps back, too. One dog was left. He jumped at Fang's neck. Fang jumped to the side. The dog came back for him, and bit his back. Fang jumped up and shook him off, then pushed him against the wall. The dog hit a chair, the chair went back and hit a broom, the broom pushed a button on the wall, while falling down. Suddenly the door began to open, and we all rushed out. The dogs were all quiet, but as soon as the door went back down, they all began to bark from inside. Alarmed by the noise, the two men came out. We rushed back into the forest.

– *"Go in and see what's going on."*

– *"You go in, they're your dogs."*

– *"I'm telling you to go in, so go."*

– *"I don't want to."*

– *"Don't be such a coward. Fine, we'll both go. You go first."*

– *"Who's scared now?... He's gone! The wolf is gone!"*

– *"You useless mutts! Go get him! Go on!"*, the man was yelling at them while

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opening the door, but none of the dogs would leave the garage.

— You're so brave, Fang. You're the bravest wolf I've ever met, McPeck said, and went over to him.

Fang smiled:

— Really? Me? Brave?

— Are you hurt? Wilfred I asked.

— No, it's just a scratch. A scratch doesn't really matter to someone as brave as I am. And mummy will take care of it.

And then, from not so far away, there came an "Aoooo".

— Mummy! Fang called out.

He started running, and we followed him. Soon he reached her.

— My poor baby! They left you all alone in the forest. And you're hurt!

Wolves gathered all around. One of them spoke up:

— What happened? A tree attacked you? he laughed.

Fang jumped up and ground his teeth, then growled, and his fur sprang up. Everyone fell silent.

— Not one, but four, and not trees, but huge hounds with sharp teeth! And two people! And he fought them all off! He got bitten by one of them. He's the bravest wolf I've ever met, McPeck spoke loudly.

— I hope he doesn't tell them he's the only wolf he has ever met. That would really ruin the moment, Wilfred II whispered to Wilfred III.

— And why should we believe a duckling? the wolf asked.

— Not just a duckling, Seamus replied, and stepped forth. Then Mozart followed, Attila and Sharpsey, and Theo. Munch hesitated a bit then joined them, followed by von Gulp, Squeaky and the owls.

— My baby... Fang's mother whispered.

— Thank you for saving us, but we'll be on our way now, Wilfred I said.

— You're welcome, Fang smiled.

— And I'm really sorry about the whole list-business, but it really is beyond my control, von Gulp said.

— It's all right, Fang answered, I understand.

We waved and smiled, and left our hero behind.

— Wolves are nice, McPeck said. It must be because they're nightcreatures, too. Just like us.

— Just like us, Mozart repeated.

— Hey, look, a river! Wilfred II called out.

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—We've crossed it, then, and we haven't seen any witches or trolls, either, no spells, no magic, Munch said.

—No, no magic at all, Seamus smiled. But just because we haven't seen them, it doesn't mean they don't exist.

—Let's see... this could be any of the two rivers on the map, but the good thing is they unite a little further down. My map doesn't show any more cities from here on... Do you suppose there are no people around here? Wilfred I asked.

—There are people everywhere, Theo answered.

The river was quite small at first, but grew steadily. We flew along it, and looked around. It was quiet.

—Can you sing while flying? McPeck asked Mozart.

—Sure.

—Will you sing something, then? Squeaky asked.

Mozart nodded and began to sing. We all just listened and watched the river and the forest. Sometimes a song can make all the difference. After a while Mozart stopped, and we were all very silent, lest we should spoil the magic his songs had brought.

—A city! Ahead! Munch announced, and all of a sudden we were back on our journey.

For a moment we had forgotten just where we were going.

—It will be morning soon. We should find a place to rest, Attila suggested. We'll go see the city tomorrow.

And so another day had passed. We were all up by nightfall, ready to spread our wings.

—As soon as we find out this city's name, we can fly on, Wilfred I said.

—Let's start looking in parks. Sometimes they write the name of the city there, Theo suggested.

—Good idea! So let's just look for trees! Many, many trees! And nicely trimmed bushes. I really don't know why people cut bushes. They have parks because they want trees, flowers, bushes, and then, when they grow, they cut them down... They really should make up their minds, Munch said.

—Poor bushes, McPeck sighed.

—Why? Squeaky asked.

—Can you imagine having someone trim parts of you? Cutting your ears, or your tail?

—Oh, my... poor bushes, Squeaky agreed.

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— There! There! Look! I even see a little pond, von Gulp called out. It's a park, it's a park!

— I see your glasses are really working, Theo smiled.

— Better than ever, von Gulp agreed.

We soon reached the park, and it proved to be somewhat bigger than it seemed.

— We should split up to find the name quicker. Sharpsey and I will go this way. Theo, take McPeck and Squeaky and fly down that alley. Wilfred I, take your brothers and go down there. Von Gulp, go with Munch, and Mozart, you go with Seamus. We'll all meet back here at the fountains. Call out if you find anything.

The park was deserted. It was a clear night and the moon shone brightly, sparkling all over the pond. We had just begun our quest, when, all of a sudden, we heard Mozart calling out:

— Over here! Over here!

We all hurried back to the fountain, to find Mozart alone there.

— Come on, this way. Follow me! Mozart led the way.

— Have you found the name? Wilfred I asked.

— No. Quickly, follow me!

All of a sudden Mozart stopped.

— Where is Seamus? Munch asked.

— What have you done with Seamus? Mr Whiskers called from inside the pouch.

— Nothing, he's here.

— Where? we looked all around, again and again, but there was no sign of him.

— Right here!

— Oh, no... he hasn't disappeared, too, has he? McPeck asked.

— No, no, look! Mozart pointed to a bush down below.

Seamus was sitting next to it.

— Seamus! Munch called out. Are you not well?

Seamus nodded.

We all landed beside him. He was sitting in a very strange position, bent over, and with his wings spread out.

— Are you tired? Squeaky asked.

Seamus shook his head.

— You've got another letter from Sheena, haven't you? You're hiding it, Theo said.

Seamus shook his head again.





– At least sit up like a proper bird. My back hurts when I see you hunched over like that, von Gulp said.

Seamus shook his head again.

– I never thought he was completely sane, but I would never have guessed he was this far gone, Wilfred II whispered to Wilfred III.

Then Seamus tilted his head to one side, telling us to come closer. As we all got closer, he lifted one of his wings. Underneath there was a fuzzy little puppy, light brown, with a short little tail. He was shivering.

– I'm just keeping him warm, Seamus whispered.

– Poor little thing... Sharpsey sighed. Why is he here all alone?

– Maybe his mummy forgot him, McPeck said.

All of a sudden, in between shivers, the puppy started crying. Mozart walked over, and stuck his head between Seamus' wings:

– What is it, little one?

– I got lost. There was the red ball and I went to get it, and I was so close, so close... and then it rolled faster and faster... and, when I looked up, I didn't know where I was any more.

– What shall we do? Munch asked.

– Well... we can't take him along. Look at him, he's noisy, and fluffy all over, and so... wriggly. And he can't even fly, von Gulp said.

The puppy started crying harder.

– We can't leave him here alone, either, Sharpsey answered.

– Hide, everyone! Someone's coming! Wilfred IV called out.

– Who is it?

– A woman and a little boy.

– Perfect! Attila said and he grabbed the puppy and put it right in the middle of the alley, then flew back.

The puppy got up and wanted to follow him.

– No, no, stay there, puppy!

– But why don't you stay here with me, too?

– We're all big and feathery, they wouldn't like us. But you're small and fluffy, they'll like you for sure, Attila answered.

And there they were:

– *"We're already late. If only you had listened to me and hadn't set your boat adrift on the pond."*

– *"But the wind was good, mummy. Couldn't we get another one?"*

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– *When your father hears you went into the water to get the boat, he might not agree to getting another one.*

They were walking fast down the alley, they passed right by the puppy.

– They didn't see him, Attila grabbed the puppy, flew ahead and set him down further down the alley. Bark, puppy! Now!

The little puppy made a little screech.

– Is this what those fierce dogs who bark like a thousand drums look like when they're little? Mozart smiled.

– *"Mummy, mummy! Look, a puppy! He's so nice. Can we take him, please?"*

– *"Oh, poor little thing... But we can't."*

– *"Please, mummy. He's here all alone, and it's dark."*

– *"No, we can't."*

– *"Please... And I don't even want another boat any more... Please?"*

– Yes, please! Squeaky said along.

– *"No, really, we can't take him home."*

– *"But why, mummy? He's so small, he'll fit anywhere we have room for him."*

– *"I'll tell you what: if he finds our house, we'll take him."*

– *"Hurry up, puppy!",* the little boy called out.

– They don't like me, either, the puppy said pouting.

– Sure they do, come on! Attila leaped forth, grabbed the puppy, and up into the air we all went.

We followed the little boy and his mother out of the park, then down the street. There, they got into a car.

– This is going to be hard... Theo said.

– Come on, follow that car! Munch called out.

And so we did. The car started going faster, and we followed it, over stoplights, crowded streets, faster and faster, avoiding telegraph poles and roofs, going high up and then way down.

– Watch out! A tunnel! Seamus warned.

We all went down, through the tunnel, but as we were descending, Attila dropped the puppy. Mozart dashed forward, plunged towards the ground and caught the puppy by his short tail. The puppy went:

– Whee!, and wriggled all over. That was such fun!

We all let out a sigh of relief.

– You know, Mozart, Seamus said, I don't think you're a nightingale that looks like a falcon. I think you're a falcon who sings like a nightingale.





Mozart smiled.

– They stopped! Munch said. Hurry! That must be the house. Quickly, place him on the door step.

– Good luck, puppy, Mozart said.

– Thank you, but don't go just yet, please, just in case they still don't want me.

– We'll stay right here.

The boy and his mother walked up to the door.

– “Mummy, look! It's the puppy!”

– “What? Well... How?”

– “You said I could keep him if it came to us, you said so!”

– “But how...”

The puppy was sitting there, wagging his tail, taking turns looking at the boy and at his mother.

– Psst, puppy, do the thing with your head to the side! They won't resist that, Seamus said. It even worked for monkeys, back at the Zoo.

And the puppy tilted his head to one side, looking at them as if he didn't understand what they were waiting for.

– “Go tell your father he needs to go down to the store and get some dog food. It looks as if we've got ourselves quite a little dog...”

The woman picked up the puppy, and as they went inside, the puppy wagged his tail at us.

– Goodbye, little one!

– I'm glad the puppy is safe now, McPeck said.

– Now we just have to find out the name of this city, and then we can be on our way, Wilfred I said.

– But where else should we look? We've already flown over most of it and seen nothing, Wilfred II said.

– I know, follow me! Theo spoke, and led the way.

– Where are we going?

– Back to the centre, where all the shops are.

– What do we need a shop for? Munch asked.

– Not just any shop. A bookshop. They keep maps of cities in the bookshops.

– But we already have a map.

– Yes, but there we should find a map of this city, and it should have the name on it.

– How clever! Seamus smiled.





- How shall we ever find a bookstore? von Gulp asked.
- Just look for a small shop with many books.
- There! I see one! Attila announced.

We landed on the roof over the entrance. Suddenly the door opened, a little bell rang and an old man with white hair and glasses came out.

- *“Closing early, Herr Blum?”*
- *“Business is slow, and tomorrow is another day.”*
- *“But every customer counts. With these big shops coming everywhere, it will be harder and harder to make ends meet. Just the other day a man came with an offer to buy my coffee shop...”*
- *“I do hope you turned it down. People still like people, not large enterprises.”*
- *“I tell you: Out of business, that’s the sign I’ll be putting up in my window instead of Fresh strudels...”*
- *“Come now, Frau Lindt, you shouldn’t be so pessimistic. We’ll manage. Good night,”* the old man said, put on his hat, and walked away.
- If they’re going out of business... that means they’re not doing very well, doesn’t it? Squeaky asked.

– I’m afraid so.

– How shall we ever get in? The door is locked, von Gulp said.

Then, all of a sudden, a little square opened up in the lower half of the door and three little mice came out:

– Customers! We’ve got customers! Come in, come in! What sort of book might interest you? Over here we have nicely coloured books, there books with pictures only in black and white, here..., one of the mice went on whispering the rest: Well, that’s not so interesting, those books don’t have any pictures at all.

– We’re looking for a map. One of this city.

– What do you need a map for? It’s not that big a city. You’re more likely to get lost with a map than without one.

– We just need to find out this city’s name, Wilfred I answered.

– I see... I see... But why?

– Because we’re making a map of our own.

– Oh, how charming... The maps are over there. Here, have some strudel and a biscuit while you look.

– Thank you, Squeaky said and took a piece.

– What’s that? Attila asked.

– Just some cakes from the pastry shop, another mouse who was just coming





from the pastry shop through a hole in the wall answered.

– Cakes! Well, what a great idea! That's it.

Attila went over to Theo and whispered something. Theo lit up.

– Excuse me, but would you happen to have a pen and paper?

– Sure, on the desk at the entrance, one of the mice pointed out.

Theo flew over, and grabbed a pen and a few sheets of paper. We all rushed over to see what he was writing:

“Special offer: Buy a book and get a cake half price.”

“Have some coffee with that book.”

He handed one sheet to a mouse:

– Here, roll it up, take it to the pastry shop, and put it up on a window, with the writing looking outwards.

The mouse nodded, rolled up the paper, and disappeared into the hole in the wall. Theo put up one in the bookshop window. Several minutes later, a few passers by stopped to read the sign:

– “Do you see that?”

– “Yes, we must come here tomorrow. And it looks quite nice, too.”

– “I hadn't even noticed it until now. Do you think it's a new shop?”

– “Oh, yes... But it's much nicer than the big one. And the coffee shop is nice, too.”

– “I can't wait to get home and tell Günther...”

– It just might work, Theo smiled.

– I found it, I've found the map, Munch called out from the back of the store.

I... I just can't quite tell which one it is...

On the back shelf there were many maps lined up.

– Berlin, Bremen, Frankfurt, Hamburg, Kassel.

– Let's look at them. This city is on a river which will unite with another river, to form an even bigger one.

And so we opened the maps one by one, looking for the rivers.

– Look, this is it: Kassel.

– Marvellous. Well, time to go now.

– Thank you for the map and cakes.

– You're very welcome, and we thank you for the idea... We really wouldn't want them to go out of business. We like it very much here: it's warm, it smells nice, and the pastries are delicious. And whenever we feel like it, we can get a book and skim through it. It's far better than the last place we lived in: it was a dump, a garbage dump. We've truly come a long way.

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- I'm sure it will all work out.
- We hope so... My cousins live in one of those new shops... People there are not nice: they lay out traps, and mice constantly have to watch what they eat. We really have it good here. So, thank you again. Have a safe trip.
- Goodbye, and away we went, flying high over the city once more.
- Are we missing something? Wilfred II asked.
- I've got the map, the pouch... no, I don't think so, Wilfred I answered.
- I'm telling you, we're missing something.
- Vic, Mr Whiskers, are you in there? No, I've got everything.
- Still... it just feels like we've lost something, Munch agreed.
- No... not something, someone, Seamus answered: Mozart!
- Oh, no... I hope he hasn't disappeared, McPeck sighed.
- No, no, don't worry little one. We'll fly back and find him. He was with us at the book store, Theo said.

As we flew closer and closer to the book store, we could hear music, a song.

– That's him! It's him! Squeaky shouted. I'd recognize his voice anywhere.

We landed near the bookshop. Mozart was inside, standing on a pile of books, with a book before him: *Le Nozze di Figaro*. He was singing. There were mice and sparrows, pigeons and swallows gathered all around. A swan was standing at the entrance. When Mozart stopped singing, everyone applauded, then they all disappeared into the quiet night.

– I've learned some new songs tonight. Wonderful place, this bookstore, Mozart said as he came out.

We flew up again. We could hear Mozart humming his newly learned tunes.

– What now? von Gulp asked.

– Now we'll soon reach the place where the two rivers unite, and then follow the bigger river all the way to the North Sea, Wilfred I answered.

– Will we fly over the sea? McPeck asked.

– Well... sure.

– I've never flown over the sea before. Is it big?

– It looks big on the map.

– What are seas made of?

– Water, I suppose. From all the rivers that flow into them.

– So a sea is like a huge plain, only it's made of water, McPeck concluded.

– Exactly.

– But can we fly over the sea? Isn't it a place for big birds?





- Oh, we're pretty big ourselves.
- How do you know?
- What? Wilfred I asked.
- When you're big. When you're all grown up, McPeck explained.
- Well... your wings grow bigger.
- And you can fly longer, Wilfred III said.
- And toads look small compared to you, von Gulp replied.
- And a boot you used to fit into easily is at first too tight, then it doesn't fit at all any more, Munch said.
- And the mice you used to fly around with don't let you pick them up any more, they won't even talk to you, they just hide from you, Sharpsey said.
- And your voice changes, and you have to find new songs to sing, said Mozart.
- And your friends start asking you if you want to play with them, even if they do it so as to be sure you'll refuse, Squeaky said.
- And things like rain or wind don't upset you any more, while snow doesn't seem as nice as it used to, Attila said.
- And then, when something happens, you don't run to mummy quickly to tell her all about it, while all the details are still fresh in your memory, Wilfred II said.
- Oh, my, I think I've always been grown up, ever since I hatched, Seamus said.
- You know, I've just thought of this. I saw on a map in the book store that the Pied Piper passed through a city further down on this river, Theo said all of a sudden.
- Who's he? Munch asked.
- I heard his story a long time ago, from some students at the University. A long time ago, as the story has it, the town was full of huge rats, who lived in all the houses, and got into all the kitchens and pantries. And the people just couldn't get them to go away.
- Why would they want the rats to go away? Didn't they like the company? Not very sociable, those people, McPeck asked.
- Well, these rats were mean. They fought with cats and dogs, and bit children, and chewed their way through everything, just to spite people. So, one day a strange looking man came to town, carrying no more than his pipe. He said he could make the rats go away, but he wanted money in return. All the people agreed to pay him. So he took his pipe and started playing a cheerful song, and, as he walked across the town, all the mice and all the rats were drawn out by the music.





– Yes, rats do like music. Fine ears they have, Mozart agreed.

– And then what? Squeaky asked.

– Then the rats were gone, and the piper came back to take his money, only, in the meantime, the people had changed their minds. They thought that they were rid of the rats anyway, and he couldn't bring them back... so, why pay? The piper got angry, and he took his pipe out again, only this time he played a different song, and all the children in the village followed him, and there was no stopping them.

– Where did he take them? von Gulp asked.

– No one knows.

– We'll have to be careful when we pass over that town. Cover our ears, even, Munch said. Is it far?

– We might reach it by morning, I'm not very sure.

– But the Pied Piper doesn't still live there, does he? McPeck asked.

– I imagine not, Theo smiled.

– But he could return every once in a while if he still wants revenge, von Gulp said, and nodded firmly. I know *I* would...

– We'll be sure to stay away from pipers, then. I don't want him to take me to somewhere far away, where I don't know anyone, Squeaky said.

It was quiet for a while, and then:

– But those children must have grown up, Sharpsey said.

– But if they didn't have their mummies with them to run to every time something happened, then they didn't know when they stopped wanting to tell their mummies something, so, if they grew up, they never knew it, Wilfred II said.

Then, from down below we heard a little voice:

– I'm guarding tonight, so beware! I'm big and I'm strong and I'll bite anyone who comes near me! a little vixen was walking up and down the river bank.

– Do you think she's feeling all right? Seamus asked. Perhaps she's hungry. That would explain her eagerness to bite.

– Let's not find out, Munch said. I may feel sorry for the little thing, but not that sorry as to become her dinner.

– Show a little courage, Munch. She's half the size of your wing, Mozart said. So we flew closer to the vixen.

– Hello, Wilfred IV spoke out. What are you doing outside, all alone on a night like this?

– I'm guarding the river bank, I am. No one can cross the river and set foot on land with me here! the vixen replied.

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—Is that so? Theo said and tried to land, but all of a sudden the vixen dashed for him.

—Hey! What are you doing? Would you really bite? Seamus asked.

—Of course I would. I have to!

—But why?

—Mummy said so.

—She said you had to bite?

—Yes, everyone who crossed the river.

—Ah, there you have it. There has been a slight misunderstanding. You see, we haven't crossed the river. We simply flew over it. So you don't really have to bite us, do you? Theo said and tried to land again.

The vixen dashed for him again:

—I'm afraid I do, just to be on the safe side, the vixen replied.

—But you won't bite us if we don't land, will you? Mozart asked.

—No... mummy didn't say anything about that.

—Then we won't land... A big fox like you, we're quite scared.

—I *am* big, aren't I?

—Oh, yes. Ferocious, too.

The vixen laughed and growled.

—What's your name?

—Snuffles.

—So, Snuffles, a big fox like you is guarding the river bank tonight.

—Yes, I am.

—That's a big responsibility.

—Not too big for me. I'm strong: mummy said so.

—So, a big, strong, ferocious fox such as yourself is doing what her mummy tells her to do? I wouldn't say that too loud if I were you, it could ruin your credibility.

—You really think so? Snuffles asked.

—Well... you still seem ferocious to us, but to others you might seem less dangerous.

—But I don't always do everything mummy tells me, anyway, so I am bad after all, Snuffles said proudly. Why, just a few weeks ago I caught a little bunny, and mummy told me to eat him... but I didn't. I couldn't, he was so funny, and I didn't exactly catch him, either. We played hide-and-seek with the others, and happened to hide in the same place. So I went to his house for dinner, and told mummy I had had dinner when I got home. I didn't say what I'd had for dinner. So it wasn't as if I'd lied





to her. And now me and the bunny are still friends, and he shows me such interesting things: carrots, for instance. I never knew you could eat them, and they're crunchy, too.

– Well... perhaps you could do that tonight, too, Mozart said.

– Oh, no, thank you, but I've had dinner tonight, I don't really feel like having carrots.

– What I mean is that, if your mother should ask you if you guarded the bank well, you could just reply that you didn't bite anyone.

– Yes... I could. And that means you could land, and I wouldn't have to bite you, because mummy wouldn't find out about it. What a good idea! I was getting a bit lonely, too, I must say. I've been up all night, and now that it's almost morning, I'm a little tired, the little fox yawned.

– I'll tell you what: why don't you take a nap, and we'll guard the bank for you, Theo said.

– You'd do that, really? Snuffles smiled.

– Sure we would, we need to get something to eat, anyway, I'm starved, Squeaky answered.

– Well, I shan't sleep very long, only until daybreak. Then I have to go report to mummy. Thank you. And just bite anyone who tries to cross.

Snuffles had hardly finished his sentence when he fell asleep.

– Oh, we'll bite them all, we will, McPeck said nodding.

And so we found something to eat and then we waited for the sun to come up, and we waited, and waited... but it was still dark.

– Do you think the sun forgot to come out? Squeaky asked. It should have been up a while ago.

– It is strange... Perhaps we miscalculated, and it's still night.

Suddenly Attila took off and flew high above the trees. Sharpsey followed him. A few minutes later they came back, and were both speaking very fast.

– Shelter, clouds, storm, quickly!

– Slow down, take turns speaking, Theo said.

– We need to find shelter quickly, Attila said.

– There's a big storm coming, with low black clouds, Sharpsey said.

– And lightning, and thunder.

– We're not safe here. Hurry!

Just then a gush of wind ruffled the birds' feathers.

– We have to go now!

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- Wait, we can't leave Snuffles here alone, Mozart said.
- She'll go to her mother, she'll be safe, Wilfred I said. Come on everyone!
- Snuffles, wake up! Wake up! You have to go! Mozart called out.

The wind was getting stronger and colder, and soon raindrops began to fall. Then there was a very bright lightning, followed by even louder thunder.

- Who's there? Go away, or I'll bite you! Snuffles jumped up.
- Go home, Snuffles, hurry! There's a storm coming!

Snuffles jumped up and ran, avoiding falling branches and leaves. We flew over her, looking for a good place to hide.

– There, look! An empty building. We should be safe there, Theo pointed out an old cabin.

Lightning was lighting up the forest more and more often, followed by thunder so loud that it made us shake. Suddenly, a tree was hit and it caught fire and split right into two. Half of it leaned over, then, pushed by the wind, it cracked.

- Snuffles, not that way! The tree will fall!

Too late. The tree had fallen, and Snuffles wasn't anywhere in sight.

- Oh, dear, I knew we shouldn't have left her there, Munch said.
- Poor furry little fellow, von Gulp sighed.
- Come on, Snuffles, where are you? McPeck called out.
- We should find her, Wilfred I said.

- The storm will only get worse, Attila said. But I guess we can handle a storm.

We landed as close to the tree as we could, only there were branches everywhere and even more falling. The pouring rain put out the fire.

– I'll go look, Mr Whiskers said, as he jumped out of the pouch and sneaked through the fallen branches.

A few minutes later, he called out to us:

- Over here, over here, she's hurt!
- How far are you? Wilfred I asked.
- Next to the trunk of the tree.
- We can't lift it up. What shall we do? Wilfred IV sighed.
- Beavers, von Gulp called out.
- What? Theo asked.
- Beavers! We need beavers. They can chew through wood.
- But what animal in his right mind will go out in a storm like this?
- Whoever said beavers were in their right minds? They are all a little crazy,

von Gulp took off towards the river.





Attila followed him.

– Where will we find them?

– They live in dams they make out of twigs on the banks. Look for heaps of branches, von Gulp replied.

Just a little further down, where the river made a slight turn, there it was: a beaver construction.

– Hello! Hello! Anyone there? von Gulp called out.

A beaver stuck his head out, looked all around, then went back in.

– Hello! Over here! von Gulp called out once more.

The beaver stuck his head out, and carefully inspected the ground.

A voice from inside asked:

– Who is it, dear?

– Oh, nothing, I'm hallucinating again about voices calling me. I may have to go back to my weekly sessions if my grandomania returns.

– Hello! Up here! In the air! von Gulp waved.

– Oh, there you are! Then, I'm not that crazy after all. What can I do for you?

– A tree fell down, just a little way off, and I thought you should be the first to know about it. Fine wood. Big tree.

– Really? Really? Where? Where?

– Just a little way up into the forest, not far from the river bank.

– Oh, no... Oh, no... I can't go there, not with that pesky little fox going up and down, biting this, and biting that.

– But you have my word the poor little fox won't bother you at all... In fact, I'm quite sure that if you should come get the wood now, she'll never bother you again.

– How do you know?

– I... know. But you have to hurry!

– Well... all right. Tell me, is it an oak tree? I love chewing oak trees. Tell me it's an oak tree, let it be an oak tree...

Soon enough, von Gulp and Attila returned with the beaver, and the beaver got to work. In no time at all he cleared a path, and we could get to Snuffles. She was lying there, sighing and whimpering. There was blood around.

– Let's take her to the cabin we saw. We'll keep her warm and dry there, Attila said.

He and Sharpsey got a hold of Snuffles and took her up in the air.

– Poor little fox... doesn't look as bad any more... there, take some branches to make a fire, these are still dry, and take one that's still burning, to keep warm, the





beaver said.

We thanked him, and followed Attila to the cabin. When we got there, they laid Snuffles on the wooden floor.

– We shouldn't have left her alone, Munch kept repeating.

McPeck walked up to Snuffles, and pecked at her:

– Psst! Psst! Wake up! Come on, Snuffles.

But Snuffles just lay there shivering. Sharpsey covered her with her wings to keep her warm. Then, a little sound came out from underneath her feathers:

– Mummy...

– No, Snuffles, it's just us. But you're all right now, thanks to the beaver.

Snuffles slowly stood up and we could see where the blood had come from: a falling branch had torn away the upper part of her ear and the tip of her tail.

– I want my mummy...,d Snuffles sighed.

– As soon as the storm is over, we'll take you to her, but it's not safe to go now, Theo said.

– My ear hurts... Snuffles tried to feel her ear. Where's my ear? Where did it go?

– You were hurt when the tree fell, remember?

– No... I want my ear back... Who'll like me without my ear?

– It's not all missing, just the tip.

– So I don't have pointed ears any more? Snuffles started sobbing.

– Look at it this way: you'll stand out, there will be no one else like you.

– But I don't want to stand out, I just want my ear back...

– I'm sorry, Snuffles...

– But just think... if I saw you without the ear for the first time, I'd think you were really ferocious. I think you're ferocious anyway, but you could say you lost the tip of your ear in a fight.

– I could, couldn't I?

– Yes, with a huge... wild boar.

– Yes! And I fought him and chased him away!

– Exactly!

– But I still want my mummy...

– The storm is letting up now. In a little while.

Soon enough the sun was shining again. Things didn't look so bad in the morning light.

– Time to go, time to go! Snuffles jumped up. Come on everyone, the sun's up!

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Up! Up! Up!

—I'll take you home, Snuffles, Seamus said. I'll be back in a bit. Come on, up we go indeed.

Seamus flew Snuffles back into the forest. The minute he put the little fox on the ground, she dashed off:

—Mummy, mummy, I fought the storm off! I fought a big tree, and it fell on me, but I fought it off, and the beaver helped a little, but I was fierce! It bit my ear, so I'm missing the tip, but I'm special now, so you'll love me more! I fought it off, lightning, and thunder and all!

We spent the rest of the day at the cabin resting. At nightfall we were ready to go.

—I don't expect we'll be passing over any big cities before Bremen, Wilfred I said.

—Did you say Bremen? As in the musicians of Bremen? Theo said.

—Yes, I suppose so. Why? Who were they?

—I don't know exactly, but they were all very famous. Very famous, indeed.

—It should be quite a while before we reach Bremen, though. We'll just follow the river.

We flew over thick forests and small villages here and there. The nights were getting colder, a sign autumn was coming to an end. We had flown quietly the whole night when somewhere in the distance, in the forest, we saw a light.

—What could that be, in the middle of the forest like that? von Gulp asked.

—I hope it's not the eye of a dragon... Whatever it is, if we let it be, it will let us be, Munch said.

—We'll let it be, we'll just have a quick peek, Wilfred IV said. Come on, this way.

As we got closer, we could see the light was coming from the window of a little wooden cottage. We stopped and looked through the window.

—What do you see? What is it? Tell me! Tell me! McPeck said.

—Shhh! There's someone inside, Wilfred II said.

—Well, if you tell me I'll keep quiet, so tell me! Tell me!

Suddenly the window opened and a voice that sounded as if it was coming from the bottom of a deep well invited us in:

—Come on in, it's cold outside.

—Oh, thank you, but we're just passing by, Attila answered, without seeing whom he was talking to.

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– Come on in, warm up, get something to eat.
 – No, really, we can't.
 – Why not? He did say food, didn't he? Squeaky said.
 – Yes, yes, come. It's our tradition to help all those in need of a helping hand.
 And with the fortune our great-great-grandfathers left us, we're more than able to do so.

We went in. The one who had invited us turned out to be a donkey. In the room, next to the fire, there was a tomcat sitting on quite a stack of pillows. He was all dressed up, wearing a black velvet ribbon round his neck, his whiskers were carefully curled upwards. He was listening to a record on the record player, and he was laughing quietly. It was very clear that he really enjoyed what he was listening to. Next to him a somewhat full-figured dog slept and snored. There was a rooster near the record player, who turned the record over after they had listened to it.

– Pardon me, but what are you listening to? Theo asked the tomcat.
 – Why, limericks, of course, the cat laughed through his nose. Turn the volume up.

*There was a little boy of New Delhi
 Who had a terrible sweet tooth for jelly
 Rice with jelly, curry with jelly
 By the time he was twenty
 He couldn't get out of the house because of his belly.*

– Mph, mph, mph, the cat laughed again.

*There was an old woman of Westminster
 Who was awfully mad everyone called her a spinster
 So she got on a boat and sailed to Katmandoo
 To learn how to practice voodoo.*

The cat laughed again with all his belly.

*There was an old man of Dover
 Whom you could never catch quite sober
 He drank to forget, he drank to remember
 Until one day he went out wearing shorts in the middle of December.*

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The record stopped.

—So, what brings you by this late at night? the cat turned towards us, and smiled till his whiskers curled up even higher.

—We're nightcreatures! McPeck said. We fly at night.

—Mph, mph, mph, the cat let out another one of his little laughs. Well, you're welcome to stay here. This is a haven for all those in seek of refuge, as a homage to our great-great-grandfathers.

—Who were they? McPeck asked.

—The musicians of Bremen, of course. Surely you've heard of them?

—Of course, we have. Of course, Theo said. Just not a great deal. Did they have many concerts?

—Well... not quite. I can tell you their story if you like. I love telling stories. I can tell you our story as well.

—Yes, please, a story! McPeck called out. He and Squeaky rushed by the tomcat's side and sat right next to him.

—Well, a long time ago, there was a man who had a donkey. His donkey used to carry many bags of wheat from the mill, but as he got older, his strength weakened, so the man couldn't really find any use for him any more. The donkey felt no good was coming his way, so he ran away to Bremen, to become a musician. On the way he ran into a hound, completely out of breath: "What are you running from?" the donkey asked him. "My master... I'm no longer of use to him when hunting, so he has decided to shoot me... What shall I do now?"

"Come to Bremen with me. There we can both become musicians."

And off they went. But further down the road they met a cat who was all fluffed up and meowing:

"What happened to you?" the donkey asked.

"I'm growing old, and my teeth have fallen out, and I would rather sit by the fire and purr than catch mice, so my mistress has decided to drown me. I ran away... but what will become of me now?"

"Come to Bremen with us, we'll all be musicians."

And as they went on, they passed a fence. On the fence there was a rooster, crowing from the top of his lungs.

"What's wrong, rooster? Why do you crow like that?"

"There is to be a party tomorrow, so the mistress ordered the chef to make soup out of me. I'll have my neck cut off tonight so I crow while I still can."

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"Then come with us to Bremen."

And there they were, all four of them, going through the forest at night, when they saw a light coming from a cottage. They went closer and saw four thieves inside, wining and dining and splitting up a treasure. So they came up with a plan to scare them away: the donkey stood near the window, the hound got on his back, the cat on the hound's back, and the rooster on the cat's back, and they started singing all at once, after which they went in through the window. The robbers all ran away, so the four went inside and ate, and each chose his own place to sleep. When the light went out, the robbers sent one of theirs to go check up on the place. The robber went inside the house. Near the fireplace, he saw two little lights, which he thought were hot coals, so he lit a match. But in fact those were the cat's eyes. The cat jumped at him and spat on him, and scratched him. The robber ran to the door, but there he stumbled on the hound, who, startled out of his sleep, bit his leg. As he went outside, the robber ran into the donkey, who kicked him from behind. Scared by all the noise, the rooster, who had been sleeping on the roof, jumped down, crowing with all his might.

So the robber returned to his friends and told them that a witch had taken residence in the house. She had scratched him with her long nails, and a man had stabbed him in the leg, while another had hit him with a club, and on the roof of the house there was a judge who had called out: "Stop the rogue! Stop the rogue!"

The robbers never returned to the house, and left their fortune behind.

— And your story? Squeaky asked.

— Well... ours isn't quite as heroic I'm afraid... Me, the mutt and the rooster, we were all living in the same house, and everything was wonderful, until a little girl turned up... She pulled my tail and the mutt's ears. One day she even wanted to feed me the rooster. Me! A gourmand, a connoisseur... That was the last straw. We packed everything up: my tux, my pillows, the records, the record player and the rooster, and here we are. And since we were leaving, we couldn't leave the donkey behind. Now, how about you? What wretched little monster are you escaping from?

— Oh... we're not escaping anyone, Wilfred I answered.

— You're not, really? You have no one to run away from? Really? the donkey asked.

— Well, no. Not that I know of, Wilfred I answered.

— How very fortunate of you, the tomcat said. Well, this is a place for those who are running away, but you're more than welcome to stay. We've got shelter, and warmth, and food, and limericks.

— What kind of food? Squeaky asked.

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—Raspberry pudding, blueberry preserves, mushrooms. Would you like to try some?

—Oh, yes, yes, yes, I'd love to, I really would.

—As you go out of the kitchen, the first door to the left is the pantry. You'll find everything in jars with labels on them.

Hardly had the cat finished giving directions when Squeaky dashed out of the kitchen. He came back a few minutes later with his wings all stretched out, holding a large number of jars.

—Squeaky, really... Could you have taken any more? Wilfred I asked.

—I tried, but my wings weren't wide enough, Squeaky answered. But I'll go again.

—No, no, you've brought too many as it is.

—It's quite all right, the tomcat said. We have lots and lots of them. Please, dig in. There are some freshly baked rolls in the oven.

By the time we had finished eating, it was morning already.

Squeaky was sitting in a corner half asleep, with his round belly bulging out, mumbling:

—Some more raspberry...

We picked him up and we followed the tomcat. He led us to a quiet room where we slept for the rest of the day. In the evening we were awakened by loud noises coming from the main room. We rushed to see what was going on.

—Come in, come in, did you sleep well? I hope our friend the rooster hasn't disturbed you. He sings — there will be good weather tomorrow.

The room was full of animals: badgers, toads, a big rat who was sitting next to the fire, a snake who had wrapped himself around a chair.

—This has been a busy day. It seems there were people walking about in the forest, so our friends came here for refuge. I don't know what those people were doing. It isn't duck season, is it? the tomcat asked.

—I don't know, I was never one to go hunting, the donkey replied.

—Duck season? McPeck asked.

—Well, yes. That is when... the tomcat was interrupted by Theo's coughing and shaking his head.

—That's when ducks fly South. Or is it North? I never know, the tomcat said. You're a duck, which direction are you flying in?

—North. We're going North.

—Well, then, that's what it is, when ducks fly North for the winter.

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All of a sudden the door opened, and a big bird flew right in, and landed abruptly on the floor.

—What is it? Is it a dragon? Munch asked.

—No, it's a vulture, Seamus answered. She is a vulture.

—Really? You know her? Hello, there, what's your name? Munch asked.

The vulture lifted herself off the floor and looked around. Her eyes stopped on Seamus.

—Well, hello, do you have a name? Munch asked again impatiently.

—Sheena, she answered.

—No, really: what's your name?

—That is my name.

—I think I've been flying too high. The wind is really affecting my hearing.

What did she say, Theo?

—She said her name was Sheena.

—You poor fellow, you're just as deaf as I am, Munch said.

—My name is Sheena, I don't think you're deaf.

Munch turned to Seamus who was smiling:

—But you said she was imaginary!

—She was.

—But she's real.

—She is.

—And all those letters? What were they? And... Wilfred I gently patted Munch on the shoulder and pulled him away.

Seamus and Sheena were standing, looking at each other.

—Do you think she got the letters? Munch asked Wilfred I.

—I think it's as if she had.

And so the two spent the rest of the evening alone in a corner.

—It's getting late, Wilfred II said. We won't be able to get anywhere tonight.

—No, I don't expect we will, Wilfred I replied.

—Well... shouldn't we say something?

—What?

—Aren't you curious at all?

—I'm sure we'll find out soon.

Time passed. An old clock sounded midnight in another room.

—Do you know her? von Gulp went over to the tomcat.

—Sheena? Of course. She's an old friend. She comes here whenever people





come into the forest.

– Do they try to hunt her?

– No, she just doesn't like them.

– What is your name?

– Sir Leopard Purrstein, but everyone calls me Sir. Yes, the awful little tyrant I ran away from knighted me. It was a nice little ceremony. She put some honey on my whiskers and a little crown on my head, and sat me on all those fluffy pillows. She had her moments... but then she took me into the house and threw me in a tub of warm water. I really thought that would be the end of me. There was foam flying everywhere. She even threw in some rubber ducks which made horrible sounds. I called for help as loudly as I could, but no one came...

– I'm sorry...

– Oh, no, it's all behind me now. And at least I got the title.

While we were waiting, Munch went up to the snake:

– Hello. How are you? Comfortable over there?

– Oh, yessss, the snake answered.

– Did they chase you out of the forest, too?

– No, I just love thissss chair. Winding around its leg helpssss me stretch my back.

– I see... Have you tried hanging upside down? Our friend Squeaky does that. You have to be careful not to fall, though.

– Yessss, I've tried that once. I was hanging down from a lime-tree, enjoying its delicate ssscent and the breeze, when a little boy jumped out of nowhere and grabbed me and used me as a swing. It stretched my back a little too much.

– Oh, I see. That is unpleasant. My name is Munch. What's yours?

– I don't have a name.

– That's too bad. Would you like to get one?

– No, I should not.

– Why not? How can your friends call you if you don't have a name?

– That's just it, they can't just call and expect me to turn around and come to them. They have to come to me.

– That could be tiring, though. Suppose they grow tired of it?

– If they have something worth saying, they'll make the effort. And if what they have to say isn't important, then why should they waste my time with it in the first place?

– I suppose you have a point. Still, a name always comes in handy. Suppose





someone decided to write you a letter. Whom would they address it to?

– Writing someone a letter can be very rude. Particularly if you don't ask for their permission first. It means you assume that whomever you're writing to is interested in getting your letter, and reading through all the nonsense – because the beginning and the end are always nonsense: "Dear So and So,... I wish you all the best, Sincerely..." – and you don't even give them a chance to interrupt your train of thought, to say something here and there, because you've already written it all down.

– And if someone should ask for your permission to write beforehand, what then?

– If they go to the trouble of coming all the way to see me and ask for my permission, then they can also say whatever it is they have to tell me.

– You know, you could have a name, and keep it a secret. This way you'd have all the conveniences of having a name and none of the inconveniences.

– Yes, I suppose I could.

– And, if you had a name, I could write you a letter.

– You can write as many letters as you like.

– Really?

– Sure. Even if I had a name, since it would be kept secret, not even the postman would know about it. He wouldn't know where to deliver the letters.

– It is rude of you, too, to put everyone to such trouble just to talk to you.

– Not at all. It simply saves me all the unnecessary "Hello's" and "How have you been? It's so good to see you again." It would be a lot ruder of me if I had a name and simply didn't answer everyone who called me.

– Very well, have it your way.

– I see you've made a friend, Sir walked up to them. Most animals wind down to relax. You wind up, Sir gave out another chuckle.

Before long it was morning again. Seamus and Sheena hadn't left their corner all night. We went to bed quietly so as not to disturb them. When we woke up the next evening Sheena was resting her head on Seamus' shoulder, while his wing was covering her.

– Should we? Squeaky asked.

– No... I don't think we should, Munch answered.

– Do you really think they'd mind?

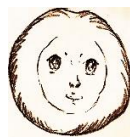
– They might.

– Still... we should...

– No, let's wait, Munch nodded.

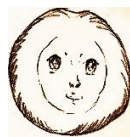
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- What for? If we wait too long, they might spoil.
- What?
- I'm going, Squeaky announced.
- No, really. Don't disturb them.
- I'm not going to disturb anyone, I'm going to eat them.
- Really... Come on... Aren't they a little too big for you?
- Nah, I'll just carry one under each wing, and then I'll open them and eat them. I'm really hungry.
- Wilfred! Attila! Munch started calling out. Hurry! He's going to eat them!
- Why are you yelling? There's plenty to go around, Squeaky nodded.
- Have you lost your mind? Eat them?
- Why? What's wrong with having a bite?
- If you do that, you'll make a mess.
- Are you saying I'm a messy eater? I'm not! My mummy taught me good manners.
- Did she teach you to eat your friends when they're sleeping?
- What friends? The jars of jam and preserves? That's it! I'm going to eat. I will. I'm going to eat and make a mess, just as I always do! Squeaky pouted and walked towards the pantry with heavy steps, whispering and lisping:
- Messy, messy...
- What happened? Wilfred I and Attila woke up.
- Oh... nothing, a little misunderstanding. I just thought that Squeaky was going to eat Seamus and Sheena.
- Well... I can understand why you'd think that. Why, with those big teeth and sharp claws, he can be quite ferocious, Attila laughed.
- I feel quite bad about it as it is, don't rub it in, Munch lowered his head.
- I'm sure Squeaky didn't take you seriously, Mozart came up to him and put a wing on his shoulder.
- Not the part about eating them, but something... slipped. He sort of, pretty much, I guess, got the idea that I thought he was messy when he ate. He seemed quite upset.
- He is a little messy, McPeck said. He's always dropping bits and pieces on my head.
- And he does like to talk with his mouth full, and when he gets carried away his lisp gets worse... von Gulp said.
- But now he's upset, Munch sighed.





—Come now, he'll be fine. A good pot of preserves, and he'll be as good as new. As a matter of fact, I think he's getting better as we speak, Wilfred IV said. I'll go see.

Before we knew it, he was back:

—Oh, dear, you were right Munch. He *is* upset. He's sitting there, with an open jar in front of him, one hand in the jar, and he's staring into thin air... If he's that close to food and not eating it, he must really be upset.

—There's only one thing to do, Wilfred I announced. We must prove to him he's not messy. We'll get him and the food out here, and we'll all sit down and eat. The minute he makes a mess, we'll just clean it up before he notices it.

—Brilliant plan, Wilfred II agreed.

—Yes, brilliant, but you're forgetting there's only thirteen of us... we might not be able to pull it off, Wilfred III said.

—Mr Whiskers, we'll be counting on you more than ever. Here, take a feather. The minute he drops anything, sweep it away, Wilfred I said.

—Aye, aye! Mr Whiskers said, hopping out of the pouch.

—We still have to get him out of there, von Gulp said.

—I'll go, Munch got up and went into the pantry. Listen, Squeaky, I didn't mean that, I know you're not messy.

—No, it's true, I am. Whenever I eat, I get food everywhere. When I was out playing, no one would ever eat their snacks with me, they said I spat too much...

—Nonsense, I've never thought that, no one has.

—It's true... no one wants to be with me.

—Sure we do. We really do.

—No, you're just stuck with me.

—Come on out and we'll all eat together, and you'll see you don't make a mess at all. Come on, I'll take these jars, you take those. Come on.

—Wait. Not the apricot one, take the strawberries, much tastier.

And out came Munch and Squeaky, both carrying a load of jars. Sir had left fresh rolls on the stove for us. We all sat down. Mr Whiskers took his position. One by one, we quietly began to eat. Squeaky was quite careful, only getting jam on the tips of his hands and spreading it on rolls. He took a few bites and looked around... nothing. Then took a few more. He then sat back, relaxed and dug in... and Mr Whiskers went to work, sweeping crumb after crumb.

—I'm not messy after all, Squeaky said with his mouth full, and everyone shook their heads.





Squeaky started another jar, and another one. We were all doing our best to keep it clean, and Mr Whiskers wasn't getting any rest. Soon the floor was covered in crumbs and jam.

– What are we going to do? Wilfred I whispered.

– We need a diversion, von Gulp answered.

All of a sudden, the door opened and a huge furry cat jumped in, chased by a tiny Pekinese dog. She ran right for us, knocked the jars over, then the dog followed and spread preserves all over.

– Oh, good, Munch sighed with relief.

Squeaky didn't seem to mind the cat-and-dog chase too much. He was relaxed, sitting back with his hands over his tummy and a big smile on his face.

– All right. Time out! We got here. I'm safe here, remember. Stop... Oh, I'm not as young as I used to be, I need to catch my breath, the big cat spoke.

– Ah, Fatima! You've made it. You haven't been by in a while, Sir greeted them.

– Well, I almost didn't. I'm beginning to get out of shape. All that purring by the fireplace.

– You still look as beautiful as ever. And how are you, Chan, my good friend? Sir asked the Pekinese dog.

– Oh, same old, same old, barking up trees here and there.

– Everyone, come in, meet my friends, Sir invited us all.

– You've got really fluffy fur for a cat, McPeck went up to Fatima.

– I'm not just a cat, you know. I'm a Persian cat.

– Why do you run from Chan? He's hardly half your size.

– He's a dog, nonetheless... That's just the way it has always been, cats get chased by dogs.

– Ah, these misconceptions, Sir laughed heartily.

– And I'm not small, look at me! I'm as big as a lion! Chan said fluffing up and shaking his head.

– Indeed, you're very fierce, Mr Chan, McPeck said.

– And besides, with his sense of direction, he'd get lost in no time if he weren't following me, Fatima said.

– We should start thinking about continuing our journey, Wilfred I said gravely. Someone should say something to Seamus.

– I'm afraid your friend might not be as keen to leave any more, Sir said pointing at Seamus and Sheena. But not to worry, we'll take splendid care of him. With all the preserves and fresh rolls he can eat, we'll turn him into a Zeppelin in no





time, Sir laughed.

Then Seamus got up from the corner and came our way. He walked over slowly and bowed his head. Wilfred I nodded at him and smiled. We all knew what he meant.

– Thank you for letting me be your friend, Seamus said.

– Sure, sure, we understand. A vulture's got to do what a vulture's got to do, Munch said.

– How do you know what a vulture has to do? McPeck asked Munch with a very confused look on.

– Well... I sympathise, I imagine it. I imagine what it would be like if I were a vulture.

– Aren't you happy being a pelican any more?

– Sure I am. Why, look at my beak. Vultures don't have a beak like this. And my wings, and my tail. Oh, no, I wouldn't want to be a vulture... That is unless, of course, I was born a vulture, Munch said while turning to Seamus. Then I guess I wouldn't want to be a pelican.

– When I grow up, I want to be a dragon, McPeck nodded firmly.

– All right, shh, let Seamus speak now, Theo said.

– I just wanted to say I'm very happy I met all of you. Before you, everyone laughed at me writing my letters.

– Oh, well... we understood, Wilfred II smiled.

– What will you do now? Attila asked.

– Sheena and I will go on a journey, we'll fly over the mountains. And then, perhaps we'll return here. I wish you all the best on your journey. And you, Vic, I hope you grow strong roots when you get there. And perhaps we can visit you one day.

– All right, enough good-bye's, von Gulp said. We've all made our points, we're all happy we've met and we should go. Goodbye, all!

– We should go, too, Fatima said. We really don't want to be late again. We can't even leave the house any more without those pesky kids putting up photos of us: "Lost cat and dog". They could at least be a bit more flattering: "Lost elegant cat with exquisite fur... and dog."

Chan growled:

– "And ferocious dog," Fatima corrected it. Well, come on, Chan, follow me, here we go.

Fatima opened the door and ran out. Chan started chasing her again, barking and growling.

– Hey, not so fast, Fatima, I'm not as young as I used to be!

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Once again we were flying over the river. Everyone was quiet.

— I'm happy for him, Munch said. Sad for us, but happy for him.

— He was always rather quiet, von Gulp said. I suppose I'll find myself thinking of him occasionally, he was a rather nice chap.





We had been flying all night when we saw lights in the distance.

– A city! A city! Squeaky called out.

– It can't be a city, those lights are moving, Attila said.

– A moving city! A moving city! Squeaky exclaimed.

We left the river and flew towards the lights.

– It's a road, Munch said.

– A big road, McPeck added. There's someone there, on the side of the road.

They're trying to cross.

McPeck flew down to the little creature that was going back and forth, to the left and to the right, moving around very quickly:

– Hello, McPeck said.

– Hello, hello, hello, the creature replied, always going back and forth.

– Pardon me, but are you a snake with feet? McPeck asked.

– Me? A snake? With feet? Ha! I should be offended, but I don't have time right now. I'm in such a hurry, such a hurry. I'm a lizard, by the way.

– A lizard? I've never seen a lizard before.

– Well, that's what I am. A lizard. I am. Are you calling me a liar? Oooh, I really should be offended, but I just don't have the time. I'm so pressed for time, oh, so pressed for time. I should have been there days ago. They'll be so terribly upset.

– Don't try to cross the street here, it's not safe, McPeck said.

– But I have to, I have to, I promised. I was going to meet my friends on the other side. Days ago, days ago. We were supposed to go sunbathing together. They'll be so upset, so very upset. I'm never late, never.

– Hold on, I'll help you across.

McPeck grabbed the lizard by his tail, flew high up in the air and then let out a shriek: he was only holding the lizard's tail, the rest of him was still on the side of the road:

– Oh, dear, I'm so sorry, so very sorry... That must hurt. Oh, dear me...

– Nonsense, not at all, the lizard replied. I was rather fond of that particular tail, but I'll grow a new one in no time, no time at all.

– And the new one will grow on you, too, Wilfred II said and laughed.

– Who're you? the lizard asked.

– They're my friends, McPeck answered.

– What a lot of friends you have. I only have two, and even they must be too upset to talk to me now... What a lot of friends you have.

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— Yes, we're nightcreatures, McPeck said proudly.

— Are you really? Well, I have never seen nightcreatures before, either, so we're even, the lizard smiled. Of course, that is probably because I don't usually come out at night. There's no sun at night, nothing to keep me warm. I'm cold, I'm so cold. And in such a hurry.

— What's your name? Wilfred II asked.

— Fritz. And yours?

We each introduced ourselves, one by one.

— It's so very nice to meet all of you, but I'm in such a hurry...

— We'll help you across, don't worry, Wilfred I said.

— But how? McPeck asked, showing us Fritz' tail. By the way, what should I do with your tail?

— Oh, I don't know... What do you usually do with a lizard's tail? No one has ever asked me that before. Whenever a little boy got hold of one of my tails, he'd just run away with it.

— So you don't want it back?

— No, no, out with the old, in with the new. All I want is to get across, tail-less and all.

— Do you think your friends have waited for you? Wilfred III asked.

— Well, that's what friends are for, isn't it? So you have someone waiting for you even when you're terribly late. I always wait for them.

— Not very nice of them to ask you to cross the street. Why didn't they cross the street? von Gulp asked.

— I don't know...

— Don't they know how dangerous roads are? Just look at those huge wheels. If they were my friends, that would get them a place on my list, von Gulp said.

— Where's that? Fritz asked.

— Not a very nice place to be, Munch answered. Let's not talk about it too much, it might make something bad happen. From now on, let's refer to the list as the L-word, just to be on the safe side.

— What are you so worried about? My list is perfectly harmless.

— Yes, it is, as long as one is not on it, Munch said.

— What list? Fritz asked, puzzled.

— It's a revenge list, Attila said.

— Oh...

— Yes, once someone upsets me, his name goes on the list... From there on, it's





quite beyond my control, von Gulp explained.

– But I don't want anything to happen to my friends! I'm not upset.

– You should be. No real friend would ask you to cross the street for them.

– Why don't you come with us? McPeck asked.

– Yes, come, then we'll be your friends. And we'll never ask you to cross the street, Squeaky said.

– Really? You'd like to be my friends?

– Of course.

– I've never had so many friends, Fritz smiled.

– Neither had I, but you'll see, you'll get used to it very easily, Squeaky said.

– And you'd like me to come with you?

– Yes.

– And you'll talk to me?

– Yes.

– And play with me?

– Yes.

– And sunbathe with me?

– Well... we'll never sunbathe without you... We only travel at night.

– How do you keep warm? Fritz asked.

– I don't know, we just do, Squeaky said.

– I've never been out at night. It sounds exciting, Fritz said. If I come with you, will I be a nightcreature, too?

– Yes, yes, Squeaky jumped.

– I'd love to come.

– Well, come on in here, then, Mr Whiskers invited him into our pouch. There's plenty of room, and the wool should keep you warm. I have some more wool, too. I'll make you a jacket.

– Thank you, no one has ever made me a jacket... But first, could we stop to tell my friends I'll be leaving?

– Sure, by all means.

– I don't want them to worry about me.

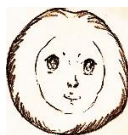
Fritz jumped into the pouch quicker than we could follow. We took off and landed on the other side.

– I don't see anyone. Some friends! von Gulp said grumpily. If they were my friends, I'd be so upset they'd all end up on my...

– Shhhh! Munch covered von Gulp's beak. Not the L-word!

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Von Gulp mumbled grumpily.

Fritz got out of the pouch:

–Simeon, Lou, I’m really sorry I’m late!

No answer.

–I’ll go check behind that rock. Are you here? Hello!

–Not so loud up there! a mole came up to the surface.

–I’m sorry, madam, I didn’t mean to disturb you, Fritz apologized.

–Not to worry, you didn’t. Who are you looking for?

–My friends. We were supposed to meet here two days ago.

–I’ve been digging around here for days and you’re the first lizard I see.

–Are you sure?

–I may not see much, but I recognize lizard footsteps when I hear them, the mole said. And no lizard has been around here in days.

Fritz sighed:

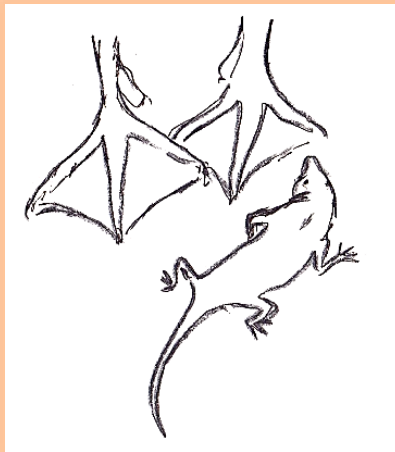
–I guess I didn’t get the meeting place correctly. This probably isn’t the only big rock around here, Fritz said and slipped back into the pouch.

–Yes, it is, the mole said, but stopped speaking when Mozart looked at her and shook his head, then put a wing over his beak in a Shhh-like way. The mole nodded. Yes, it is possible, I mean, the mole said.

–I’ll leave the tail here for your friends to find, so that they know you’re all right, McPeck said.

Fritz nodded and then was very silent for a while, hiding in the pouch. But then, after a little bit:

–So, where are we off to? Fritz asked sticking his head out.





Before long it was morning again. As the sun was going up, we could see rooftops in the distance.

— A city. It's been quite long, hasn't it? We'll need to find its name, Wilfred I said as we got closer.

— I've never seen a big city before, Fritz said. It's so small. Look at those houses, so tiny. Is this a city for midgets?

— They seem small because we're high up, Theo explained.

— How did we get this high?

— By flying.

— I've never flown before. Hey, look at me, I'm flying! If only my friends could see me now! Fritz got out of the pouch to feel the wind.

He leaned out further and further.

— Be careful, Mr Whiskers said.

Suddenly, Fritz slipped. Mr Whiskers grabbed his tail, which had already begun to grow, and it tore up again. Fritz was falling straight into the river. Mozart dashed forward and caught him just before he touched the water.

— He got him, he did. What a falcon! What a falcon! Munch said enthusiastically. Well, the slippery little thing has probably learned his lesson.

Mozart brought Fritz back, and Mr Whiskers helped him into the pouch.

— Are you all right?

— Fine, fine, never better! What a ride. I flew. Did you see me?

— Be careful next time. Had I been one second late, you might have...

— I'm nice to have around. I fit in easily. See, you fly, I fly.

— Yes, you fly, Mozart smiled.

— So, I'm not too bad, am I?

— You're the greatest lizard I've ever met, Mozart replied.

— Yes, me too, Squeaky agreed.

— You'd be nice even if you weren't a lizard, McPeck said. Of course, then, you would have found having your tail torn off quite an inconvenience, so it's good you are a lizard.

Fritz smiled. It was early morning and people were beginning to walk the

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streets.

– Hey, look at that! It's our friends, and they're standing on top of one another: the donkey, the dog, the cat, and the rooster, Wilfred IV said.

– This is Bremen! Attila called out.

– Let's go see them, let's go, McPeck said.

– It's probably just a statue. And it isn't really them, it's their great-great-grandparents, Wilfred III said.

– Let's go, just a quick peek, Squeaky pleaded.

– We'll have to be careful, though, it's already morning, there are people in the streets, Wilfred I agreed.

We landed on the statues. McPeck and Squeaky were flying round and round.

– Look at the long ears the donkey has.

– And look at the rooster's head.

Then we heard a little voice:

– Pleeese don't step on me! Pleeeeease don't step on me! Pleeeeease don't step on me!

We looked all around.

– What? What did I do? I didn't do anything, Munch said.

– There, that's where it's coming from, Theo pointed out a huge beetle in the middle of the street.

A man was walking right towards it, one step after the other.

– Pleeeeease don't step on me! Pleeeeease don't step on me!

His foot landed right next to the beetle.

– Thank you, thank you.

Some more footsteps could be heard: a little boy and his mother:

– *"Come on, you'll be late for school."*

– Pleeeeease don't step on me! Pleeeeease don't step on me!

– *"Look at that, mummy! It's a giant evil roach, and I'm going to crush it!"*

– Pleeeeease don't step on me! Pleeeeease don't step on me!

– *"Leave the bug alone, it's ugly and disgusting. Come along!"*

– Please... the beetle sighed.

The street was empty again.

– Hey, Mr Beetle! Over here, McPeck called out. No one will step on you here.

– No, I have to get to... I promised I would, and I can't even get to where you are. They'll step on me.

– Sure you can. Look around, no one!

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– I can't, I can't.
 – Just look!
 – I can't look, I'm blind.
 – I'll help you, don't worry, Fritz said, and jumped out of the pouch and slid down the statue.

He found a little tin cap on the ground.

– Here, I'll drag this and you'll hear it and you can follow me.
 – And you'll be careful not to have someone step on me?
 – I will. Come on, one step at a time. Come on.
 – I'm coming, I'm coming. This is as fast as I can go.

Two men turned a corner, talking and sweeping the street.

– Do you think you might be able to make just a little effort and walk faster?
 – Why?
 – Just wondering.
 – I really can't help it...

– *"Johann! Look at that! It's as big as a mouse."*

– *"Go sweep it!"*

– *"No, you go! It probably bites!"*

– *"Why do I always have to do the dirty work?"*

One of the men started walking towards Fritz and the beetle.

– Oh... Fritz said. Just a little faster?
 – Who's coming? Where can I hide?
 – *"I'll get you, you ugly bug!"*

The man lifted his broom high in the air.

– Fritz, run! von Gulp called out.

Then he dashed and grabbed the beetle, just before the broom hit the pavement.

– *"Well, birdie, looks like you got yourself a nice breakfast!"*

– Thank you, the beetle said.

– You're welcome, von Gulp replied.

– What kind of a bird are you?

– I'm a seagull. What exactly are you?

– I'm a scarab. I've never seen myself, but so I've been told. Tell me... am I... ugly?

– You're a very handsome scarab, Fritz said.

The scarab sighed.

– Where were you off to? Attila asked.





—My cousin's birthday party. It started last night at the mill. I was invited, but I couldn't get there.

—Why not?

—I don't know how to find it.

—Do you know what it looks like?

—More or less. It's supposed to be big, with large wooden wings that turn round and round when the wind blows.

—Come on, we'll find it together. Hop on my back, and hold on, Theo said.

The sun was almost all the way up, but the sky was a little cloudy.

—A mill with wings... If it has wings, does it fly?

—No. When the wings turn, they cause some huge wheels inside to turn and crush seeds into flour.

—Could that be it? There, next to the red field, Wilfred II asked.

—What are you asking me for? the scarab replied.

As we got closer, the wind began to blow, and the wooden wings started turning. We found an open window and went in.

—Hello? Anyone here?

—No, no one, go away! a voice answered from below the floor.

—Brutus, it's me! These are my friends, they saved my life.

—Franz! Welcome! I was worried, I thought you were upset with me when you didn't come.

—No, not at all... I just had a little trouble finding the mill.

—But you can see it from miles away.

—Yes... When you can.

—Can what?

—See.

—Of course you can, Brutus said.

—No, *you* can.

—Well, if you can, so can I.

—I can't.

—Did you look?

—I can't see.

—When did this happen?

—I'm not sure, I've never seen anything.

—Do you have friends who help you?

—Not really. Everyone says I'm ugly.

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—You're as pretty as a drop of dew. And starting today, you'll be part of my gang! We plunder and we pillage. There's a restaurant downstairs, and they're always dropping food. We keep the floors clean, really. But you can't be the lookout, that's for sure. You'll be... my second in command. This means you come with me wherever I go. What do you say?

—I say we get those crumbs!

—But until then, everyone is invited to my party: today I turn one month and two days old! There's plenty of food for everyone. Save a little for tomorrow: that's when I turn one month and three days old.





We had a nice meal and went to sleep, letting the gang go pillage and plunder for crumbs. By the time we woke up, they were back. Everyone was cheerful, except for Franz.

McPeck went over to him with very firm steps:

— What's wrong?

— It's just no good... I'm no good. No good at anything, no good to anyone...

— What are you saying?

— Well, I can't gather crumbs because I can't see them. I can't keep watch, I can't run when someone's coming because I don't see where they're coming from, so I can't tell which way to run... I can't really run altogether.

— What happened? Squeaky asked. Were they mean to you? You can tell us.

— No, no, not at all. But today, they told me to wait while they gathered crumbs, then someone yelled that someone was coming, and I should run... so I did, right into someone's foot. It's a good thing I'm ugly, because he just kicked me into the grass. Then they came and got me, and we headed back. They were very happy they got some cake and preserves. We walked and walked down this long hallway, then they turned somewhere to stash their lute, but forgot to tell me, so I kept walking until I hit a wall. When they realized I was missing, they came back for me. They were very nice, really. It's just that this bandit life isn't for me.

— Don't you think he could come with us? Munch asked. I mean... It's just one blind scarab. We can help him.

— He can't fit into the pouch, though, Wilfred II said.

— He doesn't have to, Fritz jumped up. Scarabs can fly, I know, I saw one... Not a very nice one: he dropped manure on me. And look, he's got wings, Fritz pointed to Franz's back.

— Really? I have wings?

— Yes.

— Where?

— On your back, where wings usually are.

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- How nice. I never knew I had wings.
- So you've never flown before? von Gulp asked.
- Not that I know of.
- Does anyone remember how we learned how to fly? von Gulp asked.
- All I remember is that I fell once. Right from the nest, Wilfred III said. I think someone pushed me. Did you push me? Wilfred III turned to Wilfred II.
- I think you fell and landed on your head, Wilfred II answered.
- When I was little, I was always staying in. One day, my mummy said she wanted to clean house, and threw me out a window... I didn't fly much, I just fell, Squeaky said. She forgot to tell me I had to flap my wings.
- That's it! Attila said. We have to teach him how to flap his wings. It's like moving your shoulders.
- Like this? Franz asked.
- No... they really have to move. You have to spread them first.
- Like this?
- Imagine you see someone you really like and you want to give them a big hug.
- Like this? Franz asked, and suddenly two large black wings lifted from his back.
- That's it! You've got it!
- Franz began to walk round and round in circles, flapping his wings.
- Am I flying yet? Am I? Am I?
- Hm... not yet... Maybe we need some open space, Wilfred II said.
- Let's try out the window, Munch pointed to an open window. All you have to do is flap your wings.
- Attila placed him on the ledge, and Franz started walking forward, until he was off the ledge and in mid-air:
- Am I flying yet?
- Yes, you are, you are!
- Oh, good. Well, I'll take a break now, I'm getting a bit tired. I've never flapped my wings, I'm a little out of practice.
- Don't stop now! Sharpsey called out.
- Mozart dashed out and caught Franz as he was falling, just before he hit one of the wooden paddles of the mill.
- Didn't I fly? Franz asked.
- For a little while... But you can't just stop flying, you have to land first.





– Oh, dear, this sounds complicated, Franz sighed.

– Not at all, McPeck said. You just have to slow down flapping your wings. The slower you flap, the lower you go, until you're close enough to the ground and you can stop altogether, and put your legs out.

– Let's try again, together. I'll sing and you can follow my lead, Mozart said.

And the two started off the window ledge, Mozart singing and Franz following close behind. Then Mozart started descending. Franz followed, and when they had almost touched the ground, Mozart stopped singing and Franz knew it was time to stop.

– Perfect landing! everyone cheered.

– I was terrible at landings – I used to roll over, fall on my head – but you were perfect, Munch said.

– I had friends to teach me, Franz smiled.

– If he can fly, he can come with us, McPeck cheered up.

– Indeed, Theo said. And speaking of it, it's time to go, it's getting dark.

Off we flew, Mozart singing and Franz following by his side.

Soon enough we found ourselves flying over the town again. A large group of crows startled us as they flew from one tree to the next, then started circling a little plaza.

– What's going on? Theo asked them.

– It's the miracle man and his boy: they're back. Come see. The boy will go blind and the miracle man will make him see again.

Down below an old man put his hat on the ground and started calling out to passers by:

– *"Only one second of your time, and I shall offer you a miracle in return. Only one second."*

People gathered round, and a little boy came feeling his way with a stick.

– *"Miracles, that's what I do. What would you like to see?"*

– *"Help the little boy see,"* a woman said.

The man called the little boy to him and asked him to put down his stick.

– *"What's your name?"* the old man asked him

– *"Hans",* the little boy answered.

The old man took Hans's hands in his own, then put his hands over the little boy's eyes.

– *"Open your eyes, Hans. Now you can see."*

– *"It's true, I can. I can see the sky, and the statue, and the pelican up there, and the*





house with the sharp roof."

Everyone clapped and put money in the man's hat, except for one fat man with a green hat, who grumpily said:

- "Ah, beggars!" and he walked away.
- Maybe he could help me, too, Franz said.
- If only we could get him to put his hand on you, Wilfred I said.
- That will be hard indeed, Franz sighed.
- We'll write him a note, Wilfred II said. Theo, you write, you're better at it.

Theo found some brown wrapping paper and a bit of charcoal, and as we stretched the paper, he wrote: "Please help our friend see."

- Come on, Franz, in you go. We'll wrap you up.

Franz stepped over the paper and we carefully folded its corners over him. Then Theo flew over the man's hat when he wasn't looking, and dropped Franz in.

– "We've done a good job, Hans. Just look at all the money we've made", the old man said to the little boy. "How would you like some apple cake tonight and a cup of milk and cocoa?"

- "And chocolate, too?"

– "I don't know, but apple cake with cinnamon, for sure, and milk, and bread and butter for breakfast."

- "All right, grandpa", the little boy smiled.

– "What's this... 'Please help our friend see'. This looks like a child's writing... Poor little beetle, why can't you see? Hans, give me my handkerchief, please. Someone dropped black paint on this poor little fellow. There you go, wiped clean now."

– It worked, it worked, I can see... I really can. I can see you and you and you. Oh, thank you, thank you, Franz was turning round and round flying this way and that.

- "Bye, bye, little bug... These children," the old man laughed.

– I can see, I can see, Franz went flying around, until he found himself in front of a window. Is this me? I'll move my left wing... Yes, it is me. I'm not so bad after all, am I? Ooooh, and you're so big. All of you. How can I thank him? Franz asked.

- The little boy said he wanted chocolate, Attila said.
- We'll find a sweet shop, then, Mozart said.

It was already quite dark, and we could fly low without anyone seeing us. We went down the little street, from one shop to the next.

– No, furniture store, no, bookshop, no, frozen people with funny clothes shop... There, there! Look! Squeaky was all excited.

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– Wait, someone's coming out! Attila grabbed Squeaky just in time.

A round fat man with a green hat came out of the store, just as a little boy was outside the window.

– *"Can I have that soldier, granny? Can I?"*

– *"I don't know, we'll have to ask Herr Knups if it's for sale."*

– *"It's not!",* the fat man answered.

– *"But why not? What will you do with it?"*

– *"It's mine and it's not for sale! Mine!"*

The woman and the little boy left. The man closed the shop and went away.

– How will we get in? It's locked, Wilfred I said.

– I'll sneak in through the space under the door and open the door, Fritz said, and in no time at all we were in.

The walls were covered in shelves full of jars of all sorts, full of colourful candy, chewy bits, fruit covered in sugar.

– What shall we get? Let's see, Squeaky said eagerly, as he started going from one jar to the next, diving up to his waist in each of them and tasting the candy. This, and this, and this... No, not this... but we'll get more of this. Hmmm, delicious.

We found an empty basket on one of the shelves and took it. Wilfred II followed Squeaky and caught all the candy he threw out of the jars. When he finished with the shelves, he moved to the front of the shop. There, in a glass window, was the chocolate: chocolate cakes, and chocolate covered fruit, and nuts, little chocolates in all shapes and sizes. Squeaky got his little nose full of cocoa. By the time he had finished trying out all the chocolates, his tummy was bulging out and the basket was full.

– Well, I guess that's all then, Theo said.

– Nooo! Squeaky screamed. We have to, we have to get that! he spoke in between hiccups, and pointed to a tall soldier standing high in the shop window. He had a tall red hat made of sugar, and a rifle of rosenkrantz, the buttons on his jacket – cherries, everything else – chocolate.

– He's right, I think the little boy will like that, Wilfred IV agreed, and he and Wilfred III went and got the soldier down.

They flew right past Squeaky, who sniffed the soldier all over.

– Do you want a taste? Munch asked.

– No, no... no, I've had enough, let him have it... I'm fine, I am.

By the time everyone had a snack, it was almost morning. We seated the soldier securely in his basket, and left after taking some candy with us to munch on the road.





Hardly had we left when we heard a loud voice calling out:

– “Help! Help! My shop has been vandalized! They’ve taken my soldier! Help!”

– “Quiet down there! It was about time someone really enjoyed it,” a woman yelled back.

– We’ll have to wait until this evening for the miracle man to come back, Theo said.

The town was quite small, but we found a church with a tall tower, and rested there.

– Come on, come on! Wake up, wake up! Franz called out. You missed the sunset, you missed it, and it turned orange, then red. You don’t know what you missed, really.

– We have to go, we’ll have to hurry to find the miracle man, von Gulp said.

Off we went. When we reached the plaza, the same group of crows as yesterday was flying away, saying:

– Not a good day, not a good day.

Down below the old man was sitting alone next to his hat, in which there were only a few coins and papers.

– “Can we get chocolate today, grandpa?” Hans asked.

– “Not sure... Just not a good day. No, not a good day.”

Theo found another piece of paper and started to write.

– What are you writing? McPeck asked.

– I’m thanking him. So he knows the basket is for him.

– Good idea. We wouldn’t want him to think this isn’t for them and just leave it there to spoil. It would be a pity for all these sweets, Squeaky agreed.

Just as the man and his grandson were getting ready to leave, Franz flew over and landed on the man’s hat.

– “Well, if it isn’t our paint-covered friend”, the old man said.

In the meantime Theo and Attila laid the heavy basket down behind him and put the note on top. When all was in place, Franz flew off. The man waved goodbye, then turned around to find the basket.

– “What’s that, grandpa?”

– “I don’t know... Someone may have forgotten it here. It’s not ours.”

– “But look, there’s a note... Read the note. No harm there.”

– “ ‘Thank you, our friend can see.’ It’s from the children... Hans, I think this is for you.”

– “Really? All of it? So many chocolates... I’ll never want for chocolate again,” the

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little boy sat next to the basket, and started going through it. *"This is good. Oh, try this, grandpa, and this. This has oranges inside. And look at this soldier... It's beautiful. I'll eat this last."*





The old man and the little boy went home and for a moment we stood still.

–I guess we should get going now, Munch said.

–Yes... Franz said. So, this is the place I've lived in all my life. But not any more. Come on, let's go!

–Wait! Waaaait! a voice called out. Nobody move!

–Yeah, you heard him! Nobody move!

We turned around and saw a couple of little black balls rolling straight towards us.

–Franz! Franz! Oh, I thought I'd lost you. I thought you had fallen into a sewage pipe when I wasn't looking. I felt so guilty... I didn't even celebrate my birthday yesterday.

–Brutus? Is that you? Franz asked.

–Of course it is. Oh, dear, you really have fallen. You've fallen down a chimney and hit your head. Oh, dear... what have I done...

–So this is you, Brutus. I can see you! I can see!

–Because you hit your head?

–No, I didn't hit my head. It was the miracle man, he did it, he helped me see.

–What a joyous day! Come on, Franz, let's go then, we have a lot to celebrate: two birthdays for me and the day you began to see. And tomorrow my birthday and your anniversary of the day you got your eyesight back, and then... Well, what do you say, Franz? Will you come?

–Now that I can see, I could try out living a rogue's life, it might be fun. Look, I can even fly! Franz said and hopped off the ground.

–Of course you can. Another thing to celebrate! We'll have such fun! Such fun!

–Thank you, Franz said while coming closer to us. I'll never forget you, I really won't.

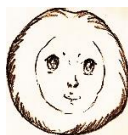
–Of course you won't, we'll have a celebration in their honour every day! Brutus called out.

–We'll never forget you, either, Squeaky sighed. Oh, and all that chocolate... he sighed again.

–Go on, your friends are waiting, Theo said and gently pushed Franz with his wing.

Franz nodded and smiled, then took to the air. He stopped in mid air and turned a bit and waved, then they all flew off, until they became a few black dots and disappeared.





The night was chilly and we were on our way once again. Then all of a sudden Squeaky called out:

– What’s happening to the river?

– What do you mean?

– Look, it’s getting bigger and bigger.

Then von Gulp started taking one deep breath after another.

– Are you all right, old chap? Wilfred I asked.

– It’s the sea! Can’t you smell it? The sea!

– How do you know? You’ve never smelled it, either, Wilfred II asked.

– It’s the sea...

– What’s that sound, like feet, giant feet?

– Those must be waves, von Gulp said, and darted off ahead, gliding on a gush of wind.

Before we could catch our breath, he was back:

– It’s the sea! It is! It is! It’s big! It’s bigger than big! It’s everywhere!

– Where? Where? Fritz jumped up, hanging on to the margins of the pouch, wearing the pullover Mr Whiskers had knit for him.

– Up ahead. It’s glorious.

– So... we’ve reached the sea, Wilfred I said in a soft voice. It won’t be long now. The map doesn’t show much from here on, Wilfred I continued. As if there were no more cities. We ought to follow the coastline until we reach a river. We’ll ask around and find our way.

So there it was: the sea. Dark blue, calm and very new.

– That’s it? This is it? This is the sea? Squeaky asked in a confused voice. What’s so great about it? It’s just water.

He flew down and touched a wave with the tip of his wing:

– And it’s cold, too!

Then he tasted it:

– And it’s not even sweet! It’s salty. It’s just lots and lots of salty water. Maybe your glasses are broken, he said to von Gulp. What did you get so excited about?

– It’s the sea... von Gulp kept saying.

– But look! Squeaky said, while flying lower and lower. It’s just water!

He splashed some water with his wings. Then all of a sudden a big wave came and threw him on the shore.

– Squeaky! Squeaky! Have you drowned? McPeck called out and rushed to him.





We all landed around him. He was just lying there.

—Say something! Anything! Come on! Look! We're all listening, you've got everyone's attention! Munch said. We'll never not listen to you ever again, now come on, speak...

Fritz jumped out of the pouch and went to him.

—I once fell in a puddle. I barely got out, and when I did, a frog jumped on me, by accident. It made me feel a lot better, though.

—But where are we going to find a frog here, in the middle of the night? Wilfred II asked.

—We don't need a frog, just someone to jump on him.

—But who? I would, but I'm too big, Theo said.

—I will, von Gulp offered. I got him like this in the first place, it's all my fault.

—It's not your fault... McPeck said. But hurry!

So von Gulp went next to him, and then jumped and landed on Squeaky's round belly.

—It's just water, see, Squeaky said in a very dizzy voice.

—It worked, it worked! He's back again!

—Hey... what did you get this mad for? What did I ever do to you? Get off my belly! You haven't put me on your list, have you? Squeaky said to von Gulp.

—He had to jump on your belly so you'd spit the water out, Wilfred I explained. You were hit by a wave.

—Oh, I remember the wave! Big bad wave! But I showed him! See, it went back to the sea! Well, thank you von Gulp, but please get off my belly now.

—Oh, of course, of course. Sorry, von Gulp said and hopped off.

—I think from now on it might be a good idea to fly higher up, so that waves don't reach us, Attila said.

—I agree! Squeaky called out.

—Do you feel well enough to fly some more? Mozart asked.

—Me? I'm fine, great. Never better, Squeaky said and took off, but just as he'd set to flight, his wings slowed down and he fell back into the sand, chin first, flat on his belly. I think I'll just take a little nap first...

—Come on, I've got you, Theo said and put Squeaky on his back, while the latter was already snoring loudly.

We kept following the coast line, and flew most of the night. It was almost morning and all was quiet... But then a sharp voice called out:

—It's not fair! Not fair! Not fair! Not fair. You won! Again.

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– I'm really sorry, I really am, another voice answered.

– Again!

– Really... I don't know how...

As we got closer, we saw two big slippery fish playing with some shells over a big rock. One of them got into the water.

– I'm going to my rock! I'm not playing with you any more!

– Come on, one more game. I'm sure you'll win this time.

But the big fish had already swum away.

– Look, the fishy's sad, McPeck said, and flew to him.

– McPeck, wait! He could eat you! Munch called out.

– But you don't eat little ducks, do you? McPeck asked the strange creature, and he shook his head.

– Like he'd tell you if he did! Munch called out.

– What's your name? McPeck asked him.

– Pirate, he said, moping and sighing.

– What kind of fish are you? McPeck asked.

Pirate suddenly jumped up:

– Don't be rude, please. Why would you call me a fish? I don't have scales, I don't look like a fish.

– Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to offend you. What are you?

– You don't know? Pirate said, very surprised.

– Well, you're not a bird, you're not a fish... No, I don't know.

– I've never met anyone who doesn't know what seals look like. I'm a seal. It's true, most of my friends are seals... But there's also Louie, the whale, and he knows what seals look like, and Snappy the crab, and Harriet the walrus...

– A seal, everyone whispered.

– Was that your friend? McPeck asked. The one who got upset.

Pirate nodded:

– My best friend.

– Why did you upset him?

– I didn't mean to, honest. Why, I even...

– What?

– Oh, I can't tell you.

– Sure you can.

– No, it's a secret, you see. And I don't know you.

– All the more reason you should tell me. When you get to know someone very





well, that's when you realize that you can't trust them. But with those you don't know, you have no reason not to trust them.

Pirate thought about it for a bit:

– I... I... guess you're right. But you can't tell anyone if I tell you.

– Of course, it goes without saying. That's the very definition of a secret. Why, I once had a friend whose cousin had told him a secret, and because it was a secret he whispered it to me in secret, and I told my mummy, and my mummy told my daddy, and since it was a secret, no one ever said a word. So I know how to keep a secret. We all do.

– All right then. I just don't know what to do any more. Every time we play checkers, I win, and Shelby gets upset.

– But that isn't that big a secret, is it? McPeck asked.

– The secret is that I've been trying really hard to let him win. Really hard. And I don't know why, but I still win... But don't tell him, it will upset him even more.

– Maybe we can find a way for him to win.

– But how? I can't play any worse. I'm at my worst ever.

– Maybe if you weren't the one playing, but the shells themselves.

– What do you mean?

– Suppose the shells played for you.

– But how? Shells don't move, Pirate sighed.

– Maybe you could play with something else.

– You're right! Crabs! We'll play with crabs.

Pirate jumped up and clapped his front flippers:

– That's how I got my name in the first place, you know.

– From playing with crabs?

– Well... I was playing, but I'm not very sure they saw eye to eye with me. I used to kidnap them and swim far far away, and I would only lead them back if they sang and danced all the way. My, how the bottom of the sea cheered up when we passed by.

– How did Shelby get his name? Squeaky asked.

– Shelby used to love to play with shells. He used to go to them and knock, and when they opened up, he'd steal their pearls. He loved pearls. He would always align them on rocks when the moon was up, to see them glisten. But then, one day, he bumped into a very smart shell. Just when he was reaching for the pearl, the shell snapped shut and clipped away a little bit of his flipper.

– Oh, dear, poor thing... Did it grow back? My tail grows back. Look, it's

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growing back now, see? Fritz said and turned around for Pirate to see his new tail.

– Very interesting. No, it didn't grow back, but it doesn't really bother him, either. It would if he were still gathering pearls, but he's not any more.

– So, how will you get the crabs to play for you?

– Very simple. I'll just ask them, nicely, Pirate laughed and dived into the water.

Small crabs with huge eyes, shells, and sharp ragged claws started jumping out of the water, landing on the rock:

– This isn't fair!

– We're not little baby crabs any more!

– You can't do this to us, you'll make us all look like fools!

– The whole sea will laugh at us!

– We're just not dancing any more! We're on a dancing strike! And no singing either!

When the rock was covered in crabs, out came Pirate, and sat on a smaller rock:

– But I don't want you to dance, or sing any more, Pirate said.

– No?

– You don't?

– He doesn't?

– Oh, dear... What gruesome thing have you thought of now?

– Oh, oh, I knew he'd never leave us alone, I told you, I told you... I want my mummy! the little crabs were calling out.

– I'd just like... I'd really appreciate it if you could play a game of checkers.

– Checkers?

– Checkers, he said?

– Yes, checkers, Pirate answered.

– Why checkers? Why not chess, or mills, or backgammon? the crabs were amazed.

– Well, there would be one more little thing...

– Oh, I knew it, I knew it. He wants us to sing and dance! I'm going to tell my mummy! a voice called out.

– No, no... It's just that... I have a friend, a really good friend, Pirate started explaining.

– Not a crab, that's for sure! a crab called out.

– Well, no. He's a seal.

– Of course he's a seal. You bigot! You couldn't possibly befriend any other

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species! Oh, no, you're friends with seals, but everyone else has to sing and dance for you!

— That's not true... I also have a bird friend, see? Pirate pointed to McPeck, who nodded.

— And I'm no ordinary bird! I'm a nightcreature, and a duck. And I'm his friend.

— And I'm a bat, and I'm his friend, Squeaky chipped in.

— And I'm a lizard, and I'm his friend, Fritz said.

— I'm a pelican, and I'm his friend. Particularly if he's a vegetarian, Munch said. The crabs were silent while we all introduced ourselves.

— So, he's only mean to crabs then! a crab spoke.

— I never meant to be mean, I just thought we could play together, Pirate sighed.

The crabs frowned. Pirate let himself slide off his rock, into the water, leaving only his pouting face above the waves.

— I'll never have any friends, he spoke softly.

Meanwhile, on the big rock, the crabs had formed a circle and were fervently discussing the matter. All we could hear was a constant humming and an occasional "What", "Who", "No, no, no". Then they all fell silent, and a bigger crab stepped out of the circle and walked forward on all of his eight legs:

— So, what about your friend? he called out to Pirate.

Pirate jumped out of the water:

— We played checkers.

— Well, that's a nice, peaceful, quiet, no singing, no dancing sort of game. Why didn't you play that with us? a little crab called out, but stopped talking when the bigger crab turned towards him and snapped his claws once, to shush him.

— So, you played a game of checkers with your friend. Surely you didn't get us out of the water just to let us know that, the big crab went on.

— Oh, no. It was more than just a game. We've been playing for weeks now.

The crabs looked a little puzzled.

— The problem is that I keep winning.

— Ah, yes, I understand... Now, pardon me, but why is that a problem? the crab asked.

— It's not just that I keep winning. It's that my friend, Shelby, keeps losing. And I've been trying really hard to let him win. But he just keeps on losing.

— So you want us to play checkers with him?

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– Not exactly. I'd really appreciate it if you could... if you were the pieces.
The crabs frowned.

– And whenever Shelby makes a wrong move, you could correct it, without him knowing it, Pirate went on. I really can't think of any other way to help him win.

– But if we help you, do you promise to never, never ever again, make us sing or dance?

Pirate nodded quickly, and clapped his flippers:

– I promise, I promise, I promise.

– All right, then. Come on crabs: red crabs on one side, blue on the other, the crab spoke, and the little crabs divided into two groups and set themselves in place for the game.

– Thank you, thank you! You really are wonderful friends! Pirate called out while going to find Shelby, and the little crabs blushed, and their antennae blushed, too.

– He's not such a bad seal, after all.

– And he must really care about his friend if he's willing to lose a game of checkers for him.

– And he did pick really nice songs, too.

Then the seals came back, and the crabs were silent.

– This is the last game! If I don't win, I'll never speak to you again! Shelby said frowning.

– Don't be so upset, it really isn't my fault... But I'm sure you'll win now. You make the first move, Pirate said.

– No! I don't want the first move any more. You go first! Shelby said.

And the game began. When Shelby made a bad move, the crabs would slowly slip into the right square, until all of Shelby's pieces had made it to the other side of the rock.

– I don't believe it! I've won! I've won! I really have! Shelby called out.

– Congratulations, Pirate cheered.

– Oh, thank you. You don't mind losing, do you? Shelby asked. I know how upsetting that can be.

– Oh, no, not a bit. Not to worry.

– I've won! I have to go tell mummy. I'll see you tomorrow, Shelby dived into the water happily.

Pirate sat on the rock smiling, while all the crabs had got their antennae and their big round eyes out of their shells. There was another gathering on the rock, and





the big crab stepped forth once more:

– We’ve decided... well, once more, for old time’s sake. One, two, three and:
“For he’s a jolly good friend, for he’s a jolly good friend...”

The crabs sang and formed an Indian line, and danced their way off the rock back into the sea, while Pirate waved at them and smiled.

– We had better get going, too, Wilfred I said. It will be morning soon.

Pirate was still sitting on the rock, smiling. Then he turned to us:

– Thank you for helping me keep my friend.

– You’re welcome, but it was the crabs that did all the work, really, McPeck said.

– Goodbye, we waved and flew off.

The air was chilly and smelled of salt.

– I see lights, Squeaky called out, as he was rubbing his sleepy eyes.

– Where? Munch asked.

– He’s right, that must be a city. And look at that big eye going round and round, Mozart said.

– Oh, dear, I hope it’s not a giant! Munch added. We should fly around it, just to be on the safe side. Giants have such a horrible appetite, and I don’t want to end up as pelican soup.

– I see houses over to the right, Attila said. That’s where we should rest. We’ll find food there, too.

Attila was right. We passed a fish market on the way, and, while the men who were loading and unloading the fish were busy, we helped ourselves to a nice meal, then found a few cosy trees to sleep in until it was night again.





– What? What? I didn't do anything! Munch jumped up, startled.
 – Did you hear that? von Gulp asked. What an animal that must be.
 – With animals that big, no wonder no one drew a map of this part of the world, Wilfred II said.

A cat passed by our tree, looking among all the bushes.

– Hey, take care, there's a big animal somewhere around here, McPeck called to her.

– How do you know? she asked.

– We heard it. Huge. And dangerous.

– Oh, dear, I hope that it hasn't got Lily.

– Who's Lily?

– My younger sister. I let her out of my sight for just one second, while I went to get a fish, maybe two. And when I came back, she was gone.

Then the terrible sound came again.

– Did you hear that? Quickly! Quickly! Come up here! Mozart called.

– That's your monster? the cat smiled. That's just a ship in the port. I have to go, I have to find Lily. Poor little thing, how scared she must be.

– We'll help you. We'll take a look from up in the air.

– You will? How kind of you. Thank you.

– What's your name, by the way?

– I'm Cream. How do you do.

– Cream? But you're mostly black, McPeck said.

– Yes, but when I was little, very very little, I fell in a bucket of sour cream, and they thought I was white for a while. I've always been very fond of dairy, you see. So my parents called me Cream. Lily, on the other hand, jumped in a heap of lilies at the flower shop, and, by the time the flower girl got her out, she smelled of lilies from the tip of her ears to the very end of her tail. It took weeks for the smell to go away.

– What does she look like? Theo asked.

– Small, fuzzy, black...

– With a white tail? Mozart asked.

– Exactly.

– Oh... In that case, there she is.

Mozart was pointing to a very crowded road, with cars passing both ways. And

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there, right in the middle, Lily was playing with a little ball.

– We can't fly down and grab her... What do we do? von Gulp asked.

– We'll have to wait for the cars to stop, Munch said.

We landed on the sidewalk, and waited... but nothing. The cars just kept on passing. Then, suddenly, a man walked down along a black and white path, and all the cars stopped.

– That's it! Come on! Munch said and stepped down from the sidewalk, but Theo pulled him back just in time, before a car hit him.

– Maybe not... Maybe we have to step only on the white stripes, Munch said, and hopped on one of the white stripes, and again Theo pulled him back just in time.

In the meantime Lily was chasing her little ball this way and that, closer or further away from the cars.

– We can't wait any more. We have to do something. Please, Cream turned to us.

– We'll cut the tree down. That will stop them, Squeaky said.

– And how will we do that? McPeck asked.

– With our claws and beaks. The tree is dry and hollow, it shouldn't be too difficult. We'll start on this side and then we'll push it down from the other side.

– Well, I'll just be... What a terribly good idea. Good thinking, Squeaky, old chap, Wilfred III agreed, and off we went to work, tearing away small pieces of dry wood, until we made quite a hole in the old tree.

– To the other side! Wilfred I called out. And one, two, three! The tree cracked.

– Again! Push, everyone!

This time the tree fell right down and blocked the road. The cars all stopped, and Cream jumped on the fallen tree and ran to Lily, grabbed her and ran back. Before we knew it, there were people everywhere:

– *"Good evening ladies and gentlemen, we're here live in downtown Bremerhaven, where an old tree fell down and interrupted the heavy traffic. If only the mayor had taken action in time, this wouldn't have happened."*

A round, short, bald man was standing next to the tree, quite close to us:

– *"Damn reporters. They'll say this was all my fault. As if all a mayor has to do is go about sniffing trees. And they'll show this tree on the news. All of Germany will see it."*

– Did you hear that? Everyone will see the tree. How wonderful. Do you remember that lovely chap, the priest, the one who gave us his cake? He'll see us, too. Come on, let's wave "hello". After all, it wasn't very polite—the way we just disappeared, I mean, Wilfred IV said, and jumped up and waved his wings.



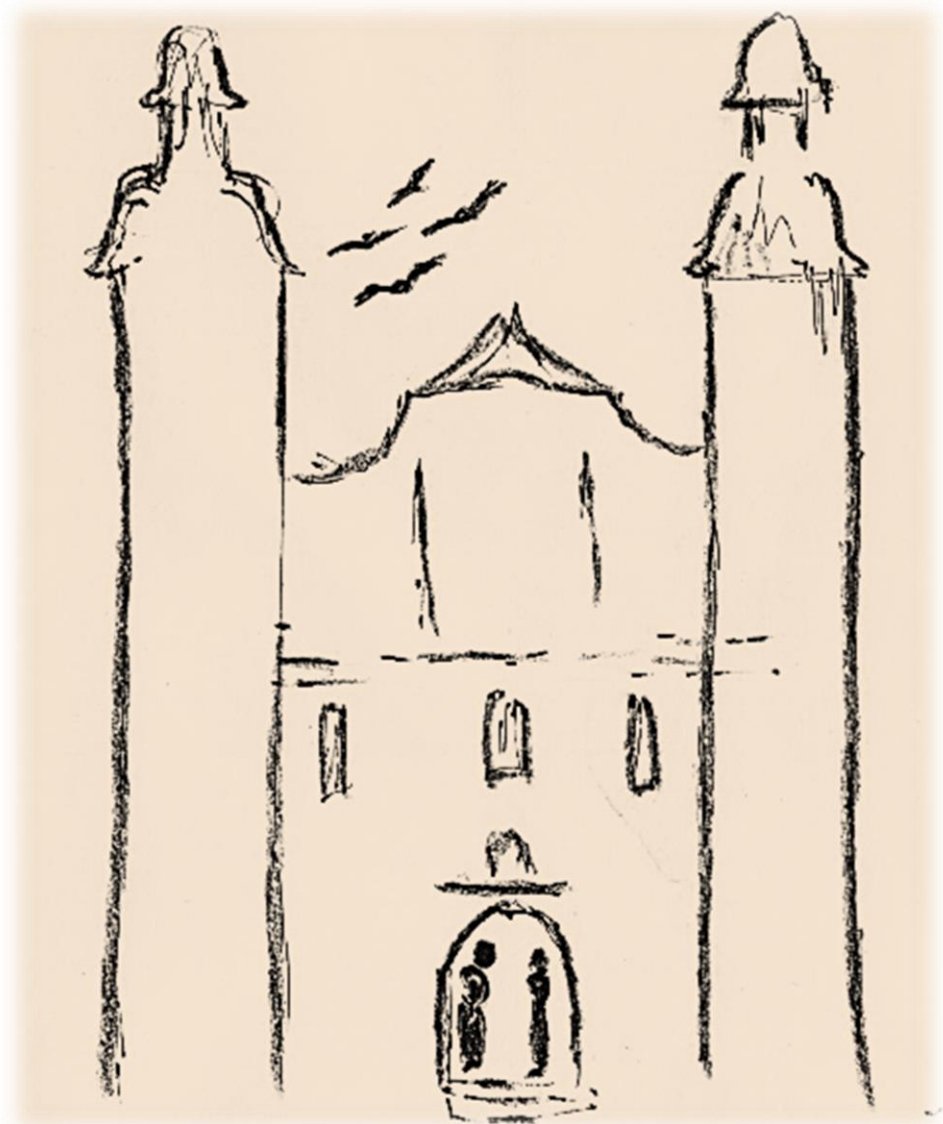


They did show the tree on the news everywhere, even in the quiet nice asylum in the Black Forest, where the priest and the man who had captured Sharpsey were resting. It was the night when they were allowed to watch TV.

– “Did you see that? Look! It’s one of the owls. They must have torn the tree down! They must be trying to tell me something. It’s them, I know it is!”

– “No! No! Not the birds again! No more birds!”

– “Nurse! A sedative! Just when I was going to send them home. They seemed just fine. I suppose they’ll have to stay here longer now... much longer”, a doctor said, and wrote something down in a small notebook.



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As soon as Lily and Cream were safe, we said our goodbyes and were on our way again. Nights felt chillier and chillier, but flying kept us warm. We followed the noise back to the sea. Cream was right, there were a lot of ships coming and leaving. As we flew over them, we could see huge boxes being loaded and unloaded. Further away a ship had set sail and was lighting the sea on its way.

— Look at that funny rat! McPeck called out, and pointed to the deck of a ship, where a huge rat with sharp ears and a long tail was jumping this way and that, stopping occasionally, standing on his hind legs and sniffing the air.

— What are you doing, Mr Rat? McPeck went down and asked him, and, since we couldn't leave him alone, we all followed.

— I resent that, the rat replied. I'm a rabbit!

— But you don't look like a rabbit.

— Never mind that. It's a state of mind. You should have seen me yesterday: I was a bull! A woman came up on deck wearing red shoes, and that made me sooo mad! I went straight for them. I was really fierce, because she ran away screaming.

— How long have you been on this ship? Mozart asked.

— What do you mean?

— Don't you remember?

— Remember? Why, I remember everything. I was born here, a few floors below, where all the food is stored, and that's where I grew up. When I was little, I wasn't allowed to come up here. Only big rats can play here, he said, and proudly puffed his chest.

— So you've lived here all your life? Squeaky asked.

— Well... yes. Haven't you?

— No, not quite. We've left the places where we grew up. We've set forth on a journey. We're nightcreatures, you see, Fritz said.

— Oh, how nice. You're nightcreatures and I'm a rabbit. I think we'll be the best of friends, the rat clapped his front paws and ran around in circles. I don't really have a lot of friends. Not many nightcreatures around here. I tried to make friends with people. I've gone up to them and I was very polite. I said good morning, asked them if they had slept well. Why, once I even offered one boy a piece of cheese. But people are so rude, so... antisocial: they just screamed and turned their backs on me. I figured, maybe they don't like rats. So one day I was a cat, then a dog, a bear, a fox, a monkey, a cow... But now I think people just don't like anybody, the rat said, and pouted for a

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little bit.

A few seconds later he was back to his cheerful self:

- A journey, you said? Where are you going? Where? Where?
- The North, Wilfred I answered.
- Oh... That's cold. I've never been there.
- Wouldn't you like to go on a journey, too? von Gulp asked.
- Me? Why, I go on journeys every day. I don't have to move to be on a journey.

Living on a ship has its advantages.

- Where is this ship headed? Theo asked.
- Stockholm. It should get there in about eight days. With a one day stop in Aalborg and one in Copenhagen. Is it on your way?

– Not sure. Our map finished a while back. This part isn't drawn on our map.

– Oh, dear, whoever drew that map was very lazy, I can tell you that. There's still a lot more left. I'll show you. The captain has a map, the rat said and ran off. Wait there! I'll be right back! Don't leave, don't leave!

– We'll wait right here, Mr Rat, McPeck called out.

– Snips, the rat answered.

– What?

– Snips.

– Who?

– Me.

– What was it again?

– Snips.

– Are you all right, Mr Rat?

– No, I'm Snips, the rat screamed, while running up a stair and down a smaller deck above.

– He's not snipsy, he's plain tipsy, Wilfred II giggled. He must have stolen a lot more from that captain than his map.

– Shhh, Wilfred II. Mr Rat, what were you saying again? Theo asked.

– Snips! Aren't you nightcreatures supposed to have good hearing?

– Snips? Is that a rabbit thing? von Gulp asked.

The rat came down the stairs, dragging a huge map after him.

– No, no, no, the rat said. Here, I'll show you, and he disappeared again for a second, and came back with a thick twig, which he put between his teeth and ran his teeth across it from one end to the other, back and forth, until the twig was all gone.

– Very impressive, but we're friends, right? Munch asked, and took a step

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back.

—Of course we are, that's why I'm telling you my name: Snips. When I was little, they put me in a wooden box, and went away to get food. I didn't like being left alone and left out, so I chewed the whole box up and followed them. And that's why they called me Snips.

—Where are your parents now? Squeaky asked.

—They needed a vacation, a change of climate, so they took a boat to Gibraltar, and now they're on their way to Morocco. Here's the map I told you about. And this is where we're headed. It's on your way. Will you take the ship to Stockholm? Say you will, say you will!

—It seems like a splendid idea, but we should be careful not to let anyone see us.

—Not to worry. During the day we'll stay down below. There's plenty of food and all the crates are nicely packed with all sorts of fluffy things, just perfect to sleep in. And during the night we'll be roaming the ship, claiming it for ourselves! The way nightcreatures do. It will be such fun!

—Sounds like a plan!

—What sort of food did you say was down there? Squeaky asked.

—All sorts: canned ham, vegetables, cheese, jams, preserves.

—Sounds like a delicious plan, Squeaky smiled. Do you think we might have a little snack now?

—By all means! Let's go downstairs, and I'll set the table for you. They brought some crates filled with nicely carved plates and cups, just perfect for a nice meal with company. And yesterday an old woman was walking up and down the deck, telling the captain how worried she was her 18th century dish-set would break because of all the waves. I wanted to reassure her that her plates were in good hands, but then she started screaming: "*Oh, no, it's that horrible rat again!*", so I let her go on worrying.

Down below it was quite cosy. Snips had gathered all sorts of little things he had found in crates and liked: pillows from a rich Indian Maharajah, a jewellery box from Africa, a tall magician's hat, candy, little statues, a walking stick with a lion's head at the top, a big book with very yellow pages and strange letters that looked like they had been written by someone whose hand was shaking, but which had beautiful drawings at the beginning of each paragraph. At the bottom of the first page there was a number: 1758. What did it mean? We all wondered.

—Welcome to my little corner of the ship! The store room is this way. After we have a snack, we can come back and rest here. We have a big night in store for us

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tomorrow, Snips said and led the way.

We had a wonderful meal. We all admired the nicely carved plates, and afterwards we came back and we each found a place to sleep: Mr Whiskers, and Fritz, and me and Snips in the jewellery box which was lined with velvet. The others lay down among the pillows, but Squeaky just couldn't find his place.

— Here, I'll set this walking stick over these two crates for you to hang down from, Attila said. This way you'll be more comfortable.

— And we'll put a few pillows underneath, just in case you want to sleep on the floor, Mozart added.

Before long, Squeaky was sound asleep hanging down from his stick, and then, just as he snored a little, his claws opened and he fell flat over one of the pillows, his wings all stretched out. He didn't mind the swinging of the ship at all, he just hugged the soft pillow, turned his head and slept for the rest of the day.

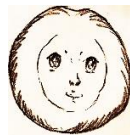
We hadn't been sleeping for a long time when up above we could hear a man screaming his head off:

— *"My map! Who took my bloody map? I'll crash you all into the first iceberg if you don't bring me back my map at once!"*

— What's that? Theo asked.

— Oh, it's just the captain. He does this all the time. He'll go at it for ten-twenty minutes more, then he'll quiet down, don't worry. Go back to sleep, Snips said.





—Wake up everyone! Wake up! Breakfast is served! Hot from the kitchen. The chef made a squash soufflé and vanilla pudding, so I got one pot of each. I thought you might like this. I don't usually eat in the house, I just eat in the kitchen, but it's different when I have company, Snips said and rolled in two giant pots.

—Mmmm... what smells so good? Squeaky asked before opening his eyes. Pudding! he screamed, and leaped up and dived his hands in it.

—No, take care, it's still warm.

—Ouch, ouch, ooooh, Squeaky pulled his hands right back out, pouting and frowning a little, somewhere between sad and angry.

Then he licked his fingers one by one, and the taste of the sweet vanilla pudding cheered him up again.

—I've also got you some fresh apple cake and muffins that the chef baked for breakfast. And, after we eat, we can go explore. Everyone is inside now, and soon they will all be going to bed.

The sky was clear. The new moon shone and reflected in the water. Snips was right, it was quiet: we had the upper deck all to ourselves.

—This way, towards where people sit during the day. They have such comfortable chairs, soft, and you can also jump on them. I'll show you.

We went into a huge hall with a red carpet on the floor and big chairs covered in red velvet. Then Snips takes a few steps back, and starts running and jumps up on a chair, and keeps jumping and jumping on the cushion, and when he's high up in the air, he starts doing flips this way and that.

—Whee! Whee! Such fun!

We were all observing Snips closely, and we had forgotten to look around the room carefully. All of a sudden we heard voices coming from a corner of the hall:

—*"We should go to sleep, it's late."*

—*"But it's such a beautiful night."*

—*"There's something strange going on this ship."*

—*"Oh, dear..."*

—*"Maybe that chef slipped something in the food."*

—*"Ooooh, dear..."*

—*"I'm seeing things."*

—*"What do you see?"*

—*"Right now I see a mouse jumping up and down on an armchair. And a bat clapping,*





next to it."

- "You promised you'd take your pills, you promised!"
- "But I did. Just turn around and look."
- "No, no, the doctor said I shouldn't indulge your hallucinations."
- "And four owls, and a falcon, and an eagle, and a pelican in Mrs. Ericsson's chair."
- "Enough! One more word and I'm getting a divorce!"
- "But just look, please! Don't leave before looking at them."
- "Good night, mouse, good night, birdies! One more word out of you and you'll be

keeping them company tonight!"

– Good night! we all replied, as the man and the woman left the room.

– What a nice couple, Snips said. And they didn't scream, either. She even said good night. Well, come on, to the game room now. We'll have to go down to the middle deck.

We all followed Snips down a narrow staircase, but then, as he was getting ready to turn a corner, he stopped suddenly and took a step back.

– What will you jump on now? Squeaky asked.

– Shh! Snips turned to us with a scared look on his face. I saw him the day before, and the day before that, and the day before that, too.

– A man?

– No... A dog.

– Dogs are nice.

– Not watchdogs, Snips said. Trained to bite. I know, they once brought one down in the storage room. He was in a cage, and I felt sorry for him, so I offered to keep him company. I knew dogs liked sticks, so I got one and played with it, ran around the cage. He almost bit my tail off, and he spat dreadfully. An English Bulldog he was, just like this one.

We all took a peak: a solid dog with large jaws and floppy cheeks was walking up and down gravely.

– What are you doing? Wilfred II asked Squeaky.

– I'm trying to make some room to see the dog.

– Easy there, don't push, Wilfred III said and stepped aside, and Squeaky fell flat on his stomach.

– You didn't do that on purpose, did you? Squeaky asked pouting.

– No, of course not. So sorry, chap. Are you all right? Did you hurt yourself?

– No, I'm all right.

– Are you sure?





— Enough! Run! Run!

The dog had heard the noise, and was running straight for us, much faster than we would have thought he could.

Von Gulp grabbed Snips, and we flew off.

— Wait! Wait for me! Wait for me! Where are you all going? Are you going to play something fun without me? Please, I want to play, too. Pretty please? And look, I've got scones, and cookies, and treats!

— Cookies! Squeaky called out, and went back.

— Nooo! Snips screamed from in between von Gulp's claws, but it was too late, Squeaky had already landed, and was chewing away at cookies.

— I'm so glad you came back. It's awfully lonely out here.

— Aren't you used to it, as a watchdog? Squeaky asked.

— Who's the watchdog?

— You are. I saw you walking back and forth.

— Oh, yes, I was practising my walk for the show. I've won so many medals, I filled a whole wall with them. And they're so shiny.

— You're not a watchdog?

— Depends. What does a watchdog do?

— Walks up and down.

— I do that.

— Looks to see if there is anyone around.

— I do that, too. I love making new friends.

— Bites everything that moves.

— No, no. Only cookies, scones and doggie treats.

— What are doggie treats?

— Cookies made especially for dogs.

— How nice... to have something made especially for you.

— Stand back, Squeaky, I'll protect you, I will!, Munch walked forth with his eyes closed.

— Hello, the English Bulldog said when Munch opened one eye.

— Hello... You won't bite, will you? I've never been bitten by a dog, but I don't imagine it to be very pleasant.

— No, he only bites cookies, scones, and doggie treats, Squeaky answered.

— Exquisite choice, Munch said. I'm Munch, by the way. How do you do?

— I'm Samson.

We all made Samson's acquaintance.

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–Where do you get the cookies from? McPeck asked.

–My mistress bakes them. She also makes apple pies and muffins, and whenever she feels depressed, she bakes the best brownies, but shhhh... I'm not supposed to know. Dogs aren't supposed to eat tasty things.

Squeaky was just sitting there, nibbling on the same cookie.

–How very unusual, Wilfred II whispered to Wilfred III. He's still eating the same cookie.

–Oh, dear, you suppose he hurt himself when he fell? Wilfred III asked Wilfred II.

–No, I think it might be something serious.

–Squeaky chap, what's wrong? Wilfred III asked Squeaky.

–Doggie treats... Squeaky said sighing.

–Oh, you want a doggie treat. Why didn't you just say so? Samson, old fellow, you wouldn't mind, would you?

–Of course not, help yourselves. But careful, they tend to be a bit sticky.

Samson gave Squeaky a treat in the shape of a bone, but Squeaky just sat there looking at it.

–Well, won't you give it a nibble? Wilfred II asked.

–It's for dogs, Squeaky sighed.

–You knew that beforehand, though.

–Hmmm, tasty, McPeck said pecking at it. Won't you try it?

–It's made especially for dogs.

–That does explain why it's called a doggie treat.

–They don't make anything especially for bats. I never had something made especially for me.

–Oh...

–It's not my fault I was born a bat.

–Don't worry, I'll share. I have treats shaped as balls, and sticks, and steaks.

Squeaky sighed again.

–What do we do? Wilfred I whispered.

–Well, we come up with a plan. We think about how strong the opponent is, what resources we have, we make up a strategy for the battle, and we attack, Snips said seriously.

Everyone was quietly looking at him, not sure what he meant to say.

–I've just always wanted to say that, but I never had anyone to say that to, Snips said. Now, let's see. What does he like?





– He likes... to hang upside down, Munch said.
 – He likes to be carried when he gets tired, and sit comfortably and feel the wind against his wings, Theo said.
 – Sweets, McPeck said.
 – That's it! We'll bake him a cake! Snips said.
 – That sounds complicated, von Gulp thought.
 – Not at all. The chef has a cheesecake ready made, and I saw them loading strawberries in port. We'll just top it with strawberries. Perfect!

Fritz went over to Samson to tell him to keep Squeaky company while we got the cake ready, and off to battle we went. Snips led us to the kitchen.

– In there, that's where they keep all the good things, Snips said pointing to a shiny metal cupboard.

Theo opened the door, and a wave of cold air came out. On the top shelf there was a big cheesecake. The owls took it out and set it down. We found the strawberries, too, and covered the cake in strawberries.

– Now... something that says "Squeaky"... Chocolate syrup! Snips said.
 He ran to a top shelf, and came down with a brown bottle:
 – Here, take me by the tail, I'll hold the bottle, and I'll draw Squeaky on the cake, Snips said, handing his tail over to Theo.
 Theo flew Snips over the cake, and Snips drew Squeaky's head in chocolate.
 – Perfect!
 – Do you think anyone will mind if we take the cake?
 – Mind? They should thank us. Just think, the cheesecake was just sitting there all alone. What a pity to let such a good thing go to waste, Snips replied.
 – We're forgetting something... Wilfred I said.
 – I'm here, Munch answered.
 – Fritz! Mr Whiskers realized.
 – Coming! Coming! a little voice came from the shiny cold cupboard. Wait for me!

Fritz was trying hard to break free from there, but the door had closed over his tail. One more pull and the tail tore again.

– Oh... and I was growing fond of that tail. Oh, well, next tail!
 Wilfred I went down and collected him, and we took the cheesecake to Squeaky.

– "You know what I see now? A flying cheesecake!"
 – "Stop it! Stop it! I'll have you committed this time!"

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– “Look out the window. With a bat’s head on it, too.”

Voices came from a room when we passed in front of the window.

– Surprise! Snips ran to Squeaky. Look, a Squeaky treat!

– There is no such thing as a Squeaky treat, Squeaky sighed.

– Sure there is. Look! Made especially for you.

Squeaky turned around:

– For me? You did that? Really? You made this for me? I’ve never had anything made especially for me... The Christmas ornaments I used to play with were for the tree, the berries were just there, for anyone. But this, this is for me, Squeaky said with a big smile on his face. I’ll share with you.

And we all sat down and ate the cake, and what a delicious cake it was! Even Samson agreed.

When the sun began to rise, Samson went back to his mistress:

– I have to go before she wakes up. She wouldn’t like to know me out at night. But then she does think I’m lazy when I sleep all day. The truth is I just have an active night life, really.

– You could be a nightcreature, too, then, McPeck said.

– I could, couldn’t I?

– Yes, and you could come with us to the North.

– Are there dog shows there? Do they allow mistresses to come along, too?

– Not sure... Or you could just be a nightcreature and keep it to yourself, even if you don’t go to the North.

– Yes, I’ll do that, Samson smiled. So, if I’m a nightcreature and you’re nightcreatures, does that mean we’re friends?

– We are.

– Good, I’ve never had friends before.

– But you said you liked making friends.

– Oh, I do, I do, the trouble is they never sit still long enough, they always run away when I run to them. Tomorrow then, same time, same place, just us nightcreatures.

– Tomorrow it is.

We retreated to our little fort and were just getting comfortable when a loud noise came from the kitchen:

– “My cheesecake! My strawberries! I ordered them especially from Spain! Who ate my strawberries?”

We could hear someone throwing pots and pans around.

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– “Ouch, ouch, not me! Not me!”

Then a voice announced on a speaker:

“We’ve reached the city of Ribe. The oldest city in Denmark. We’ll stop here until lunch. Those who want to visit are asked to return by 3 o’clock. Maps and guides can be found at the information desk. Enjoy your day!”

And we just fell asleep.



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C. I. Young

Nightcreatures



306

PART V

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Universitatea din București

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—Wake up, wake up, wake up! It's dark. It's time for us nightcreatures to be out and about! Samson called out, as he stood over us and drooled.

—We're getting up, we are...

—Just one more minute, Squeaky yawned and fluffed up his pillow and tried to go back to sleep, but Samson went over and pushed him with his muzzle.

Squeaky mumbled something and turned around pulling his pillow, but Samson grabbed one corner of the pillow and pulled and shook it. Squeaky jumped up wide awake, with wide open eyes:

—All right, I'm up, I'm up.

—No wonder he can't make friends. Not many insomniacs out there, Wilfred III whispered to Wilfred II.

—So, what will we do tonight? What? What? Samson asked eagerly.

—We'll start by having breakfast.

—Breakfast, yummy. Of course, I've already eaten, but I could have just a bite. Just a small bite. I have to watch my figure for the show. So what's for breakfast?

—Let's see... We have pasta from lunch, that's what the chef prepared, and crêpes with preserves.

—Mmm, tasty. But I've already eaten. I shouldn't. Well, maybe just a bite. Just one, Samson said and gulped down a whole pancake. Very good, very good. Aaa... but I think I've already had this somewhere before. Was it in Stockholm, or maybe Oslo... Oh, now I remember, it was at lunch today. I was sitting beside my mistress' chair, and the Baroness joined her. Lovely old lady, she just keeps forgetting everything. So, when they weren't looking, I grabbed her pancakes. She figured she had already eaten them, so she didn't say anything. Good thing she didn't say a word, I had preserves all over my cheeks.

We ate breakfast quietly while we were still waking up, and when we had finished, Samson asked:

—So, what shall we do today? Shall we go chase birds?

McPeck frowned.

—No, not a good idea, Samson smiled. Oh, I know, I know. We can pay the Baroness a visit. Even if she sees us, they won't believe her, or she'll forget to tell anyone. And she's really nice. Really. Every time I go there, she finds something yummy to give me. Why, a few days ago she gave me a butter cookie, then she forgot





she had given me a cookie, and gave me another one. And another one. After a while I had to leave: I felt bad, I was eating all her cookies. Come on, let's visit the Baroness.

So we followed Samson down a narrow hall, with doors on both sides. Samson stops in front of a door which is ajar, and pushes the door open with his muzzle, then he just stands there.

– Don't you want to go in?

– No. Why?

– Why did you open the door then?

– I just can't stand closed doors.

We keep walking, and Samson keeps opening every door which does not seem to be locked.

– Almost there, Samson says. It's the next door on the right, then he pushes open the door next to it.

Two men are inside, going through luggage and boxes.

– "A ghost," one whispers.

– "There are no such things as ghosts," the other one answers.

– "Then why did the door open?"

– That's strange: those things belong to the Baroness.

– It's not nice to be nosey, McPeck says, and heads in towards the two men.

– No, stay here! Attila calls out.

McPeck lands and walks up to them. Samson follows, grabs McPeck and runs out, but on the way out, he hits a mannequin on which the Baroness' fur coat was resting. The mannequin falls over a knob in the wall, turns it down, and a bed falls from the wall and traps the thieves, who are screaming their heads off.

– "A ghost! Help! It got us!"

– Oh, dear, I'm always so clumsy, Samson says.

– Yes. Luckily for us, you are, Theo smiled.

Soon, the screaming woke up the other passengers, the captain and the crew.

– "My brave little doggy! My little Samson caught these villains who were trying to steal the Baroness' jewellery. And to think you almost didn't want him on board, Captain! You see how brave he is, my cute little pudgy puffy monster. He left the room in the middle of the night, even though he just loves to sleep, because he knew something was going on."

Samson went back with his mistress, who kept petting and kissing him, and he was thoroughly enjoying it.





We waited for everyone to go back to their rooms, but then, just as we were getting ready to go back to ours, the door opened and out came a little old lady with white hair, barely awake:

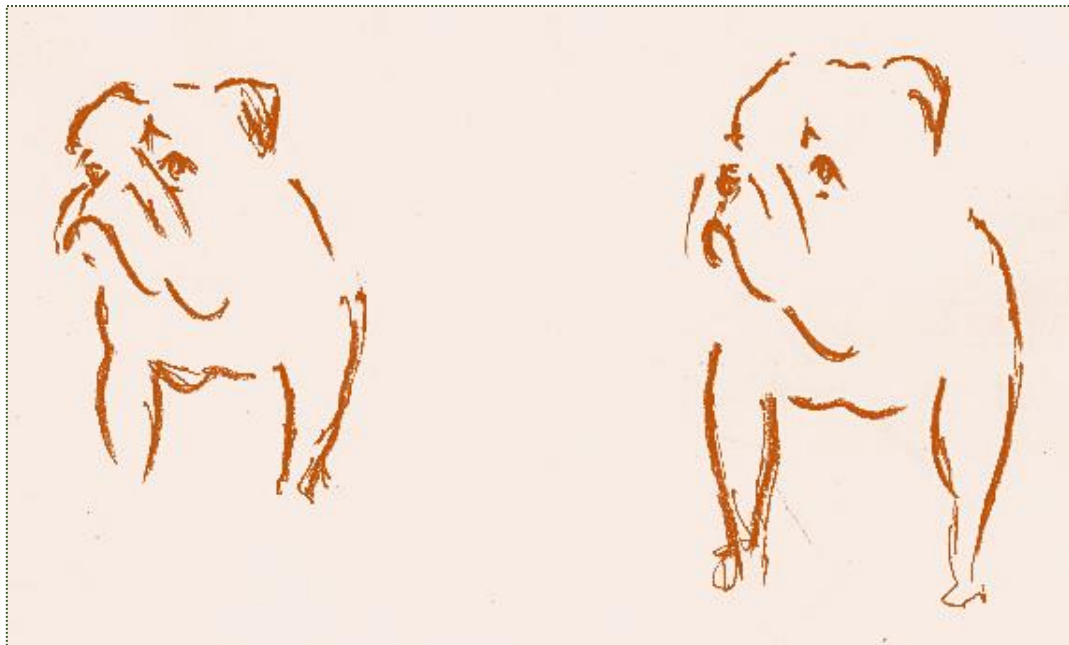
– “I thought I heard a noise. Oh, dear, the door is open. I must have forgotten to close it.”

She locks the door and she stands there in the middle of the hallway.

– “Now, why did I come out? It’s not morning yet, is it? Oh, I’m so forgetful. I’ll just go back to sleep”, she said and closed the door.

We had got to the end of the hallway when we heard a door opening again.

– “Were there owls here? And a duckling, and a bat, and a pelican, and... no, I must have been dreaming. Why would I get up in the middle of the night, anyway. I must have dreamt it all.”





The day passed quickly and, when the evening came, Snips woke us up with fresh cookies and a cup of coffee.

—Now, I'm not sure you'll like the coffee. Maybe just one sip. It's good when you get used to it, Snips said. But if you have too much of it, it can make your heart beat really fast, and it can make you go up the wall. Literally. I know. And when you go up a wall, you find there aren't many things you can hold on to. And then you realize you're quite high up... And then you go back down. Can't be helped. I know, believe me, I know. So, careful with the coffee.

—Aaah, cookies! Squeaky was yawning and stretching.

He got up, came closer, and started eating cookies, one after the other:

—Chocolate chip, yummy. Apricots, yummy. Raisins, yummy. Cranberries, a little less yummy. I'm thirsty now. Oh, a drink! Squeaky said, dived into the cup of coffee, started drinking it, and didn't stop until he had reached something like sand on the bottom of the cup.

Then he took his head out and started spitting the little grains of coffee everywhere, as if he couldn't get them off his tongue:

—It's bitter... Who would make a bitter drink.

—It's Turkish coffee, Snips answered.

—Oh, no... Theo sighed.

—Oh, yes, I'm telling you, it was really bitter, Squeaky repeated. It's a good thing I drank it all.

Squeaky took one last cookie and went to sit down in a corner, to clean his teeth. We were all eating quietly when all of a sudden Squeaky jumped up and started flying about.

—Oh, oh... Oh, oh, oh, Squeaky was calling out.

—Squeaky, old chap, what is it? Wilfred IV asked him.

—Oh, dear, oh, dear, he went on.

—Oh, dear, indeed, Theo sighed.

—What's wrong, Squeaky? McPeck tried to catch up with him.

—I think I swallowed a butterfly. Oh, I feel so guilty. But I didn't mean it, honestly.





– When did you do that?
 – I don't know, I really don't know, but I can feel it fluttering in my chest.
 – The coffee, Snips whispered.
 – It was in the coffee, that's it. I didn't see it, and I must have drunk it. I'm a murderer, I am.

– No, no, it's the coffee making your heart beat faster.

– Oh, I see. No butterfly then?

Snips shook his head.

– Oh, good. I feel better then. A little.

Then all of a sudden he starts flying around and around, circling the room. Then, on his way he hits a big cage which was covered with a black cloth and knocks it over.

– Hey, what's the big idea? Would you like it if someone threw you down, and woke you up? a voice came from the cage.

– It's a parrot! Snips called out. Oh, good, they always tell such nice stories. Good evening, you must be a new passenger.

– I am, indeed, and so far not very happy with your services.

– Pardon our friend, he has had a little too much coffee.

– All right, as long as he has a good excuse.

– Come on, Squeaky, stop, you'll get dizzy, McPeck said.

– I can't, I can't.

– Please stop, you're making me dizzy.

– I just can't.

– I heard a noise. Is everyone all right? Samson ran in.

– Fine, fine.

– What happened?

– What difference does it make? What's done is done and can't be undone!

Squeaky answered.

Samson's eyes lowered, his lower jaw went a little more outward, and his ears went down.

– Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to snap at you, Squeaky said. I just can't help it.

– He's had too much coffee, Snips explained.

– Well, all right then.

– I'll tell you what: if you let me out of the cage, we can get your friend in here, just until he feels better, the parrot said.

– It might be better for him, Wilfred II whispered to Wilfred I.





—Yes, just look at him going round and round and round, von Gulp said following Squeaky with his eyes.

—Don't look too much, you'll get dizzy, too, McPeck said.

Theo catches Squeaky. In the meantime Snips lets the parrot out of his cage, and in goes Squeaky.

—There. Just wait now, the effect will pass.

—So, what's your name? Munch asked the parrot.

—Don Juan. I come from Brazil, you know.

—Really? Where is that?

—I don't know very well, probably on another ship like this.

—Have you always lived in a cage? McPeck asked.

—No, not always. When I was young I used to live in the jungle, and I'd scare the whole jungle away. One day I met a lion, and he was sitting under my coconut tree. I dropped a coconut over him and warned him I could be very vicious. He said he'd pluck me clean if I didn't let him be, so I told him that, if he did that, I'd peck his big fur off and use it as a coat. That's how bad I was.

—Do you think it's true? Wilfred II whispered to Wilfred III.

—Sure, just leave out the part about scaring lions, pecking and coconut dropping, Wilfred III replied.

—Do you know any more stories? Snips asked.

—No, I don't hear that many in my cage. And the little girl who looks after me has a rather limited vocabulary. Every day she comes to me and says "Good morning", and she just keeps repeating that over and over again. I've tried replying "Same to you," hoping she can maybe learn something new...

—Shall we go for a walk? Samson asked.

—We can't. We can't leave Squeaky alone, Sharpsey answered.

—Yes, yes, and I've never been out of the cage, either, Don Juan said.

—Never? Wilfred II asked.

—Only when I was young, in the jungle, scaring tigers and leopards.

—Never, then, Wilfred III whispered to Wilfred II.

—Aren't you curious to see what the world looks like? Munch asked.

—Sure. Put me back in my cage, and you can take me for a ride. And, hey, I'm feeling wild tonight: you don't even have to put the black sheet over the cage.

—All right, but let's just wait a little longer, until Squeaky calms down.

—I'm calm, I'm calm! Squeaky screamed.





— Well, if we aren't going anywhere, will someone scratch me behind the ear?
Samson asked.

— Why?

— Because it's fun.

— All right, I'll try. Let's see, Wilfred IV said. Like this?

— No, higher and to the left. There... Ah... ha.

— I can't understand why you think this is fun.

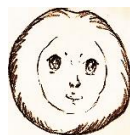
— I don't think he meant fun for you, Wilfred II said.

Suddenly the door opened, and two men walked in carrying a crate:

— *"Look, an owl and a dog! Quick, take a picture. We'll send it to that photography contest. If it wins, it will be on the cover of the magazine A dog's life!"*



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The photo won and made the cover, and the magazine was sold everywhere, even in that quiet asylum.

– “Doctor, I’ve been thinking: don’t you think it would help if our patients had some light reading? I got a magazine this morning. Very lovely, look: a dog and an owl – best friends.”

– “Quite right. It might be just the thing.”

– “I can’t believe it, it’s the owl! It’s a sign, it is!” said the priest.

– “Oh, no, no, no! Not them again! I’m supposed to be a patient, and you’re supposed to make me feel better! This is no asylum, it’s a torture chamber!”

– “Well, these two will definitely be spending Christmas here,” a nurse said.





Just before morning we let Squeaky out, and let Don Juan back into the cage, and flew around the ship once.

— What a lovely stroll. Thank you. I've never felt the wind against my wings like that. Not since I left the jungle, I mean, where I used to scare cheetahs and giraffes away.

— You're welcome. We'll fly around some more tomorrow. But now, we should rest. It will be daytime soon, Wilfred I said, and we each resumed our places, and Samson went back to his mistress.

Squeaky was quiet again.

A little while had passed when Squeaky whispered to Wilfred I:

- Are you sleeping?
- Would you believe me if I said yes?
- What reason could you possibly have to lie to me?
- Why aren't you going to sleep?
- I'm not sleepy.
- Close your eyes.
- All right. For how long?
- What?
- How long do I keep them closed for?
- Until you fall asleep.
- And when I fall asleep, what? I open them? What a lot of help you are.
- Count sheep.
- How many?
- Flocks and flocks of them.

Squeaky went quiet for a bit.

- I can't.
- Why not?
- They're all sticking together. It's hard to say which ones I have counted and which ones I haven't.





– Have them move from one enclosure to the other when you count them.
 – O-oh.
 – What?
 – It's getting awfully crowded in the other enclosure.
 – All right. Just sit still, close your eyes and think of something nice. You'll sleep before you know it.
 – Wilfred?
 – Shh...
 – But—
 – Shh, quiet.
 – All right, I'll keep quiet... Still sleeping?
 – Trying to.
 – Even now?
 – It's not working very well. Why don't you go and fly around a bit until you grow tired.

The day passed and, when evening came, we all got up to have breakfast.

– No more coffee today, Snips smiled.
 – No, just pie. Delicious, McPeck said. Squeaky is going to love this.
 – Why isn't he getting up? von Gulp asked.
 – Where is he? He's not on his pillow.
 Indeed, he wasn't anywhere in sight.
 – Oh, dear... Wilfred I sighed. It's my fault. He couldn't sleep, so I told him to fly around until he got tired.
 – Come now, he can't have got very far. We'll just go look for him, Theo said.
 – But careful, the passengers are still having dinner. They had a one-day stop in Aarhus today.

We sneak down hallways, avoiding people, checking every rail and pole... but no sign of Squeaky. Then, as we pass the great dining Hall, there, hanging down from a chandelier, over the Captain's table, is Squeaky snoring.

– *"You see, madam, you were wrong. This is one of the most elegant, prestigious ships: fine cuisine, refined entertainment, impeccable attires..."*

Squeaky snores a little louder. His little feet let go of the pole, and he falls flat into the crème brûlée.

– Hmmm, yummy..., Squeaky says as he sinks into the soft dessert.
 – *"Aaaaah!"*, the woman screams.





– “I want the rat back! Take away the bat, bring back the rat!” the captain yells and hits the table with his fists.

All of a sudden, turning down chairs and pushing people away, Samson runs towards the Captain’s table, grabs the plate with Squeaky in the crème brûlée and dashes out. He puts the plate down on the floor and licks Squeaky clean.

– Really... you could have saved me some, Squeaky gets up for a moment, then dozes off again.

With Squeaky saved at last, we go back beneath the deck.

– What were you thinking? Wilfred III asks Squeaky.

– I wasn’t thinking, I fell asleep. I got tired and fell asleep. Why didn’t you at least get more dessert?

– Did someone say dessert? a lisping voice came from the boxes next to the wall.

– Who said that?

– Not me, Don Juan answered.

– Who sssaid what? That’s a very vague quesstion, since everyone sssays somethththing at sssome point, the voice spoke again.

– Who are you?

– I am who I am.

Snips, Mr Whiskers, and Fritz carefully approached the boxes and knocked on each one.

– Who’s there? the voice asked after they had knocked on one of the bigger boxes.

The box had a label: “Python”.

– It’s only us.

– Oh, all right, then, thank you for the clarification. Sssay, could you open the lid just a little, just to let some air in?

– I don’t know. He’s in a box, not a cage. A box. What if he’s dangerous? Munch said.

– There was a little misssssunderstanding, they ran out of cages, and put me in a box, that’s all.

– We’ll just crack it open a little, McPeck said. Poor thing, all crammed up in there.

Attila and Theo undid the lock on the door, but suddenly the door flew open and out came a huge snake.

– Oooh, my poor bones. They crammed me up in there, I couldn’t even move.





- Hey, you shouldn't be out here, Don Juan said.
- *You* go back in there. I know *I* won't.
- But you said...
- Yessss, I asked you to just open the lid a little. I did the ressst, didn't I?
- You're not going to eat us, are you? Snips asked.
- No, I ate last week, I'm still quite full.
- What's your name? McPeck asked.
- What's a name? the snake answered.
- A word your friends use to call you.
- I don't have any friends, and nobody calls me anything. People scream when they ssssee me, but that's not my name, I hope.
- What did your mommy call you when you were little?
- What's a mommy?
- Mommies are the big birds who stay with you until you hatch, and teach you how to fly, Wilfred IV answered.
- The only thing that stayed with me until I hatched was a big lamp, and it didn't say much. And I just don't think I'm the flying ssssort.
- Would you like a name? von Gulp asked.
- Sure. This way I could call myssself whenever I have something to tell myself. Sometimes I have such interesssting things to say, I even sssurprise myself.
- How about... Bjorn? Snips asked.
- The snake shook his head.
- Gustav?
- The snake shook his head again.
- Hamlet?
- The snake nodded:
- I like that... Hamlet.
- Perfect. We'll write it on the label, over your box, Wilfred I said, and they found a pen and cut out "Python" and wrote "Hamlet" instead.
- I think it's safe to go back now, Snips said. The passengers must have already gone to sleep.
- We're going out? Oh, my, Hamlet lifted his head.
- I'm not sure you should...
- Why not? Why should I ssstay here if you're going?
- It doesn't sound very fair, McPeck agreed.
- All right, but you must follow us. At all times.





Hamlet nodded with his head and tail at the same time, and off we went, Hamlet winding down, covering half the hallway.

– Ouch, he said, turning to Samson.

– I'm sorry, you're just so long, I didn't mean to step on you.

– Ouch!

Samson grabbed Hamlet's tail and carried it as he walked.

He let go of the tail when we reached the upper deck. There, on the deck, in the moonlight, we could see a little star-like fish, flapping its feet.

– Attack! Let's kill it! Hamlet called out and rushed forward, but Samson caught his tail and held him in place.

– How very rude. Now, if you were lost, would you rather someone killed you or gave you directions? Wilfred II said.

– What's wrong, fishy? McPeck asked the star who was pointing to the sea.

– I think it wants back in the water, Snips said. A wave must have thrown it on deck.

Theo grabbed it and threw it in the water, a little further away from the ship. The little star started moving about in the water, waved goodbye and disappeared.

– With that attitude, it's obvious why you've never had friends, Munch said to Hamlet.

Hamlet let his head drop.

– Come on, to the kitchen, follow me! Snips said.

We went to the kitchen and had a late snack, and then, as the sun was beginning to come up again, we headed back.

– Something's missing, Samson said. I'm not stepping on anything.

– Hamlet! Theo called out.

– It will be day soon, there will be people everywhere.

– We'll have to split. Whoever finds him first must let everyone know.

In groups of two, we searched every deck, every hall... but nothing.

– In the Dining Hall, Snips called out and we all rushed over.

And there was Hamlet, winding around a colonnade. People passed him without noticing him, sat down, had breakfast. Hamlet sat there dipping his tail in a bit of jam or honey from time to time:

– Hmm, deliciousss.

When everyone finished breakfast and all the tables had been cleared, Attila and Theo rushed over and tried to take him off the colonnade.

– No, I'm not going! Hamlet shook his head.

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– Come on. If people see you, they'll put you back in your box.

Hamlet went on shaking his head.

– And they won't let you back out.

– Ever? Hamlet asked.

Theo shook his head.

– Well, all right, Hamlet said, and let himself slide down the colonnade.

– *"We're docking in Helsingor, ladies and gentlemen. Take the day and visit Hamlet's castle. Tonight we shall head for Copenhagen."*

– I have a castle? Hamlet asked.

– Well, not you. It must have belonged to a prince. It's supposed to be haunted.

– What is that? Haunted?

– Another word for visited, I suppose. Tourists haunt it all the time.

– I don't have friends, I don't have a castle, I don't have anything except my box, Hamlet pouted, and went back into his box, winding round and round and pulling his tail over himself, so he could fit back in.

– Come on out, Mr Whiskers went over.

Hamlet shook his head.

– We can be your friends, Squeaky said.

Hamlet looked at him and pouted again.

– And who said that castle couldn't be yours? Theo said. Would you like to have a castle?

Hamlet nodded.

– If that's to be your castle, we should go have a look at it, shouldn't we?

Hamlet nodded so hard that his tail dropped out of the box.

– We'll go as soon as it gets a little darker.

– Can I come, too? Snips asked.

– Me, too? Don Juan asked, too.

– Of course. Snips, I'll take you, Attila said, and grabbed him, and you can follow us, Don Juan.

– But I... Fly, you mean?

– Yes.

– But I...

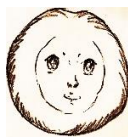
– Didn't you fly in the jungle?

– No, not a whole lot. I mean, I just stayed on my branch and everyone kept away from me.

– But you do know how to? Snips asked.

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—Of course. I may live in a cage, but I'm still wild at heart, you know. Why, yesterday I didn't even want the black cloth over the cage.

—Well, people on the ship would say flying is like riding a bicycle, Snips went on. I've never done either, so I can't tell you any more, but I hope that helps.

—Don't worry, Don Juan. If you get tired, you can rest on my back, Sharpsey said.

All that being said, we carefully sneaked off the ship and, as soon as we were in the air, we could see the castle overlooking the sea.

—How beautiful... Hamlet sighed and let his tail drop, settling more comfortably, as he was being carried by all four owls.

Hardly had we begun crossing the sea when Don Juan jumped on Sharpsey's back.

—What are you doing?

—You said I could, when I got tired.

—But we've only just started to fly.

—I'm a little out of shape.

—Not so tight, loosen your grasp a little.

—All right, but do you think you could fly a little slower? I'm getting dizzy.

—Where should we land? Should we fly a bit further? Theo asked.

—No, no, here will be fine, Don Juan answered.

—There, on the roof. There is an open window, and we can go in through there, Attila answered.

In no time at all we were inside, going down a narrow staircase, until we reached a large hallway.

—This is definitely the castle for me, Hamlet said. With all this space, I'd never have to coil up and pull my tail to fit anywhere. I could just let go.

—And you could have a banquet in here, Theo said.

—What's that?

—A big party.

—Yes, yes, I could.

—And you could have lots of company over for a visit.

—Why would I do that? Visitors are messy to have. And they never do what you want them to, like open your door, for instance. They simply knock on your window and stick their noses against the glass, and when you take the trouble of getting up from behind your rock and coming up to their hand, they scream and run away.





— You could have friends over.

— I could. If I had friends.

— You have us.

— Well, then, we should have a banquet! Hamlet jumped up.

Suddenly, there was noise coming from the garden.

— This way! Theo called out, and down some more stairs we went and waited to see what happened.

Nothing.

— I hate waiting and not knowing what's going on, McPeck said.

— Aaaah! Munch screamed all of a sudden, and we turned around to see why.

A man! A man!

An old man was sitting quietly behind us: "Holger the Dane", a sign next to us read. "As legend has it, when Denmark is in danger, Holger the Dane will wake up and defend it."

— Shh. He must be sleeping, Squeaky said and nodded.

— It's only a statue, Wilfred II said.

— We should go back up and see what's going on, shouldn't we, McPeck? Theo asked. McPeck?

— He's gone, Sharpsey said.

— Oh, no... Don Juan remarked. I mean, luckily, I'm here, and I've fought lions and tigers, and leopards... Wait, wait, wait for me!

We went back up, and searched every corner, and Hamlet was particularly meticulous while going about it, but there was no trace of McPeck. Then we heard the noise again.

— Outside, by the trashcans!

As we were hurrying over, McPeck was quietly walking closer to someone:

— Hello, are you a wolf? McPeck asked.

— Yes.

— A nice wolf?

— What difference does it make? I'm a wolf, and wolves eat ducks.

— Would you, really? Eat me?

— Sure. Though I've never eaten a duck before. What should I start with? The head or the tail?

— I don't know, I've never eaten a duck before, either. What do you usually start with?

— Whatever is in the trashcans. That's what I finish with, as well.

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– You, poor wolf.
 – Away from my friend! Keep away! Hamlet dashed forward hissing his split tongue off.

The wolf took a step back:

– Please, don't spit on me.
 – Oh, dear. My apologies. I do that when I get carried away.
 – Well, go on, fight him! Wilfred IV turned to Don Juan.
 – Who? Him? Me?
 – Yes. Didn't you say you fought lions, and tigers, and leopards?
 – Yes, but never wolves, Don Juan answered very gravely, shaking his head.
 – I'm all right, don't worry, McPeck reassured Hamlet. Have you had dinner yet, Mr Wolf? McPeck asked the wolf.

– No, I can't find anything decent in the cans tonight. Only empty bottles.
 – Luckily for you, I'm having a banquet. Would you like to come?
 – Where?
 – In there.
 – Inside, you mean? Oh, I couldn't. I get in enough trouble if they catch me over here.

– It's my castle, and I'm inviting you. Right this way.
 – You know, it's supper time back on the ship. If we hurry, we could get some platters and bring them over. I can sneak into the kitchen and get them out.

– Hmmmm, food! Squeaky said.

Attila, Theo and the owls agreed to go.

– I won't be helping you. I'll stay right here and keep an eye on the wolf. He seems awfully sneaky, Don Juan whispered to Theo.

– All right, Theo whispered back.

Soon they were back with baskets of fresh rolls, butter, cheese, ham, jams and pies. We laid everything down on the floor and ate quietly.

– What a nice banquet this is, the wolf smiled happily.

– Really? You think so? Hamlet asked.

– The best I've ever been to.

Hamlet smiled.

– It's getting rather cold outside, don't you think? Don Juan asked.

And he was right. As the evening came, it got really chilly.

– Yes, and it is getting late, the ship will leave port soon, Snips said.

– I suppose we should get back then, Hamlet said.





—I'm so very glad you came, the wolf said. Your trashcans have such better things than mine.

We said our goodbyes. The wolf went about his business, and we flew back on board. On the way to our quarters we passed an open window:

— *"Darling, could you turn the TV on so we can see the news?"*

'Elsinore Castle vandalized! The police are checking for prints, but whoever did this job knew what they were doing. They left no finger prints, yet the Great Hall is full of food and leftovers.'

— *"Come quick! Look there, in the background, flying over the water. It's the four owls I saw a while ago. And the pelican, and..."*

— *"You haven't been taking your pills, have you? I'll send you to that mental institution I heard about in the Black Forest. As soon as we get back."*

— *"Just look! It's them! They must have done it."*

— *"I should never have married you. My mother was right."*

—Aaah, what a day, Hamlet stretched.

—How was the castle? Did you like it? My mistress took me there earlier today, too. Did you see the old man sleeping? And the halls? What a place to play with a ball in! Samson greeted us.

—It is nice, Hamlet smiled.

—Everyone hide! Someone's coming! Snips called out.

— *"There's a python here. They're taking him to the Copenhagen Zoo, to keep another python company. If we get him, we can sell him and make good money."*

— *"But how will we get him off the ship?"*

— *"It's dark, who'll see us? Now let's look at the boxes. Not here. Not here either. 'Hamlet'! Look at that", a man laughed. "Let's see what's inside."*

Suddenly Don Juan got out of the cage and pecked the man's hand. Samson bit his leg. Don Juan started screaming:

—Thieves! Thieves!

Soon, the captain and a few men ran down and caught the thieves.

— *"My sweet little boy! He's done it again. Here, Samson, good boy!"*

— *"My parrot, too! Did you hear him? All those years of training have paid off,"* another man said.

When everyone had left we came out again.

—Thank you, Don Juan, that was really very brave of you, Hamlet said.

Don Juan sat proudly in his cage and fluffed up his feathers.

—Would you like the cloth over the cage? Theo asked.





- No, I think I wouldn't. Not tonight.
- We should all get some sleep now, it has been a long night, Attila said.
- A long night indeed, Hamlet agreed.





We slept the rest of the night and the following day. Samson woke us up in the evening:

- They took Hamlet! They took Hamlet!
 - It's all right, the captain checked the people who took him. They took him to the Zoo. He'll have a python-friend there. He'll be all right, Mr Snips said.
 - We didn't even say goodbye, McPeck sighed.
 - You have plenty of time if you'd like to go. He's in the Copenhagen Zoo.
 - Oh, can we? Can we? Squeaky pleaded.
 - Well, all right. But how do we find the Zoo? Wilfred I asked.
 - Wait, Mr Snips said and ran off.
- In no time at all, he brought back a shiny leaflet with a map on it:
- Here. Right here. The ship won't be leaving until tomorrow evening, so take your time. I hear it's a beautiful city. Very beautiful. From what I hear.
 - Wouldn't you like to come along? Attila asked.

Mr Snips lowered his head, and looked sideways a little, moving his tail from side to side:

- I don't know. If you think I can...
- Of course, I'll take you.
- Tell Hamlet I said goodbye, too, Samson said. And that I'll miss carrying his tail around.

The city was brightly lit, little lights reflected in the water, in between houses.

- These must be the canals, Theo said.
- What are canals? McPeck asked.
- Large streets made of water.
- If I understood correctly, the Zoo should be somewhere near that part on the left.

- Oh, look: a tower! Let's fly around it once or twice!
- Why?
- To get a better view of it, because it looks like fun!

We followed Squeaky round and round the tower, until we got dizzy and landed.

- Oh, that was such fun! I never understood it when the older bats were doing it, but I understand it now. Would you like to go again?





—No, we're fine, thank you, Wilfred IV answered. Now, if we could just get this park to sit still and stop turning, we might find Hamlet.

—Let's ask around. Excuse me, Munch walked over to a pond where a very large animal with a big head was resting in the water. You're not really sleeping, I can see your tail moving!

Munch called out again and the animal opened one eye.

—Got you!

The animal opened the other eye and frowned.

—We're trying to find a friend, Mr... Mr... Hippopotamus, Wilfred I read off a sign. A python.

The hippopotamus opened both eyes even wider, then went under water completely for a few seconds.

—Brunhilda? Why could you possibly want to find her? She once got lost here in the Zoo, but not even the keepers were that eager to find her.

—No. His name is Hamlet.

—Oh, the new one... Poor guy. Stuck in the same place with Brunhilda...

—What's so bad about her? von Gulp asked.

—There's nothing bad about her in particular. She's bad on the whole. Whenever you try to talk to her she just stands up and Ssss's you and spits at you. And the worst thing is when she sheds her skin. And she's so... discoloured.

—What do you mean?

—She's white.

—I'm yellow, and my friends don't think I'm that bad, McPeck opened his eyes and pouted.

—But you're supposed to be yellow. She's just not someone I'd like to share my pond with. There.

—Still, we'd like to find our friend.

—At your own risk. Follow the alley past the elephant house, into the big building with dark windows. Good luck, I hope you catch her in a good mood, the hippopotamus said, and sank in the water again.

—Won't he drown? McPeck asked, worried.

—No, no, I'm fine, the hippopotamus answered, blowing bubbles under water.

—"Elephant house", Squeaky read. Let's go in and look.

We found an open window, and sneaked in. There were big grey creatures standing here and there, trees, plants.



—Oh, my, just look at all the big cows. Can I bite them? Please? Just one? Just one bite?

—No.

—Just one little bite?

—No! How would you like it if someone came into your home and bit you?

—Just one...

—No. Come on.

On we went until we reached the building with glass windows. “Reptiles”, the sign read. It was dark inside, but on the right and left of the hallway there were big rooms with glass walls, and well lit.

—“Boa”, “Cobra”, “Viper”, “Python”! That’s it! Wilfred I called out.

Squeaky ran forward and put his face against the glass:

—Hamlet, we’re here!

—Easy, look what the sign says: “Don’t touch the glass”.

Squeaky backed up and pouted:

—Don’t touch the glass, don’t bite the elephants, he mumbled.

McPeck walked up and knocked on the window.

—Yesss? a voice answered.

—Hamlet, it’s us!

—Oh, hello. How wonderful to sssee you. I was getting rather lonely. In spite of the fact that his place is bigger than that crate, and I don’t have to coil up in order to fit.

—We heard you have a room-mate now.

—And she’s not very nice, McPeck nodded.

—Oh, she’s all right. Especially now.

—Why now? Theo asked.

—She’s not here.

—Where is she?

—I don’t know.

—You mean you’re free to go in and out as you wish?

—Not really. She sneaked out when the man came to feed us. I’m sure things will work out. Everyone screams when they see her, so they should find her in no time. So, you’ve come all this way just to see me?

—Yes, we didn’t get a chance to say goodbye.

—All of you?

—Samson said to say goodbye, and that he’ll miss carrying your tail.

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– Oh, how nice. And where is Squeaky?

– Squeaky is... is... where *is* Squeaky?

All of a sudden all the lights went on, and two men came in:

– *"The motion detectors went on here."*

– *"Are you sure you saw a snake?"*

– *"Yes, a white snake."*

– *"We'll check the pythons: that's the only white one we've got."*

We all flew close to the ceiling. The men walked up to the window.

– Hello! Hamlet came up to them.

– *"She could be hiding in the tree trunk. I'll go in and check."*

– *"Be careful, this new one seems pretty wild."*

– *"She's not here. Sound the alarm!"*

– *"Did you hear that?"*

– *"What?"*

– *"It sounds like the fluttering of wings."*

– *"This isn't the time to think birds. Think snake. Large white python."*

– *"Look, up there!"*

Then, as if the alarm going off wasn't loud enough, there were screams and thumping, and the whole building moved.

– *"Leave the birds alone, there's a stampede in the elephant house. Hurry!"*

– I don't understand why people are always sssso agitated, Hamlet said.

– Why exactly did she leave? Wilfred I asked.

– I swallowed her toy, Hamlet looked down and mumbled.

– What toy?

– A fluffy doll with a red hat.

– Why?

– I wanted to see if it fit into my mouth.

– And?

– It did.

– How did she know you took it?

– She asked me where her toy was.

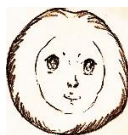
– And you told her?

– I cannot tell a lie.

– You shouldn't tell lies: you should just have kept that one to yourself.

– Where would you go if you were upset and ran away? Wilfred II asked.





—I wouldn't run away. I'd bite the other snake's head off. So, all things considered, perhaps it's better that she ran away.

—We should go find her. She's all alone out there, Sharpsey said.

—You don't have to rub it in, I feel bad enough as it is, Hamlet sighed.

—We should find Squeaky, too, McPeck said.

As we flew out, the screaming and the thumping got louder. We went into the elephant house, and sneaked past the people. When we looked down, there was Squeaky, chasing a huge elephant, opening his mouth as he got close to him.

Mozart rushed down and got him just before he bit the elephant.

—So close, I was so close, Squeaky said.

—Come on! If people catch you, you'll be in big trouble. And we've got more important things to do: Brunhilda is missing.

—Oh, no! Squeaky said, while still following the elephant with his eyes.

—Come on! we called out to him as we were heading out.

—Oh, all right, Squeaky sighed and followed.

We searched everywhere. Fritz sneaked in-between rocks, Mr Whiskers and Snips checked every tree hole. We stopped to think about where we should go next. Don Juan sat on top of a cage:

—What animal is that? he asked, pointing to an animal who was sleeping.

—A lion, Wilfred III answered. Like the ones you used to scare in the jungle.

—Oh, right, right.

Don Juan opened his beak and let out a sharp scream towards the lion.

The lion sleepily opened his eyes, looked up, then roared so loud that he blew a few feathers off Don Juan.

—Well, really, lions have no manners here. How very rude, Don Juan spoke, still shivering a little.

—I think we should look outside the Zoo, von Gulp suggested.

—I agree, Don Juan nodded.

—We'll go back to the snake house and pretend we are snakes, to see where we would go, Munch said.

—We could try walking, Theo agreed.

And that's what we did. We landed at the snake house, and walked down the path, out of the Zoo. The streets were empty, so we kept on walking until we reached a large square.

—There!





Don Juan was right. In the middle of the square, the white snake was hanging on to the lamp post tightly, whispering:

– All these lights, lights...

– You must be Brunhilda, Wilfred I said. How do you do?

– I've been better. I've been better. All these lights...

– Come on, we'll help you back, Theo said and tried to grab her, but she was holding on tightly.

– All you have to do is let go.

– I can't.

– Sure you can. Just relax, let go.

– I can't. All these lights...

– I have an idea, Mozart said, and started singing a song: "Nessun dorma."

In the meantime, Fritz climbed up the pole and started tickling her. Slowly, she began to let go. As Theo was lifting her, Fritz headed for her tail, but, when he tried to unwrap that from around the pole, she laughed and hit him with it. Fritz flew through the air, von Gulp caught him by the tail, which broke off, and Snips got him just in time.

– Another one, Fritz sighed.

– Sorry about that, von Gulp said, handing him the bit of tail.

– Well, perhaps the hippopotamus was right, Wilfred II whispered to Wilfred III. If she goes around hitting everyone, no wonder she doesn't have friends.

Back to the Zoo we flew, sneaking past the people who were busy searching with lights everywhere.

– Now, how do we get you back in? Theo asked.

– Through the back. There's a door there which it leads to a back hallway, and there's another door which leads to the room.

– You sound like you've done this before.

– Only once or twice, Brunhilda answered. But I'm getting better every time.

Mozart opened the door, and we were in a smaller hallway, with doors on one side.

– Let's see. This one?

A snake jumped up and puffed up his head.

– No, not this one. Maybe this one?

A huge creature with spikes on its back opened one eye.

– No, not this one. Here we are. Hello again, Hamlet, old chap, Wilfred IV said.

Brunhilda went in and curled inside an empty tree.

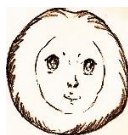
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- I'm sssorry I took your toy, Hamlet went up to her. Will you forgive me?
- I don't believe in forgivenesssss. I believe in actions and consequencesss. You want different consequencesss, you change your actions.
- I'll never take your toy, again, I promise.
- Of coursse you won't. That was the only one.
- So you won't forgive me?
- What difference does it make? It won't bring my toy back.
- But you can't be friends with someone you're upset with.
- Exactly. What did I sssay? Haven't you been lissstening?
- Fine, so we're not friends. But next time you run off, you could at leassst have the decency to ask me if I want to come along.
- You'd run away with me?
- Sure.
- Really?
- Yes.
- Brunhilda came halfway out of the tree, and looked at Hamlet.
- You're not going to bite my head off now, are you? Hamlet asked.
- Why would I?
- That's what I'd do if someone took my toy.
- It was an old doll, I've had it since I hatched. The colours were fading, anyway.
- It didn't taste very good, either, Hamlet reassured her.
- Not so honest, Wilfred I whispered.
- Thank you for bringing me back, Brunhilda turned to us.
- You're welcome. We should get going now, we must head back for the ship.
- Ship? Brunhilda asked.
- I told you I sailed all this way just to be with you, Hamlet said.
- Goodbye!
- Goodbye, and thank you, nightcreatures! Hamlet called out.
- You're welcome, Don Juan replied.
- Nightcreatures? Brunhilda asked.
- I told you I get around. My best friends are nightcreatures, Hamlet said proudly.
- *"I don't understand, she's not in any of her usual places"*, voices came down the hall.
- *"Maybe we should check the tree again."*





- “Do you hear that? It’s those birds again.”
- “Would you forget about the birds and focus on the snake, for a change? Would you look at that!”
- “What?”
- “She’s right there, and she’s all over the new python.”
- “But that’s not possible. I looked. I saw her crawl out of here.”
- “Right. She went out for a walk, then got back in.”
- “No, really, I’m telling you. And those birds.”
- “I’m beginning to think you have bigger problems than those birds. We’ll have to find a name for this new one. Maybe Tristan, or Erik...”

Theo found a piece of paper and a pen on a table at the entrance. He wrote “Hamlet” on it, and put it over the sign which read “Pythons”.

It was almost daybreak when we reached the ship.

- Did you find him? Did you, did you?
- Yes, we did.
- And how is his friend?
- She’s nice. I think they’ll get along, Theo smiled.
- Oh, good. I’m glad she’s nice. It’s unpleasant to spend all your time with someone who isn’t nice, Samson said.



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The ship left just before morning. A voice briefly interrupted our rest:

– “Malmö, ladies and gentlemen. We shall stay here until tonight. Take the day to visit the beautiful parks and sights.”

The day passed and, when it got dark again, Squeaky woke us up with a loud yawn, as he stretched and rolled from side to side on his soft silky pillow.

– Just a little longer. Soon everyone will have finished dinner and we can go walk about the ship, Mr Snips said. But until then, I’ve brought breakfast.

Little sandwiches, cheese, jam, cookies, a real feast. By the time we had finished eating, the ship was quiet.

– Let’s take over the ship, nightcreatures that we are! Don Juan called out.

– Yes, let’s! Please, please! Samson pleaded.

So up we went to the highest deck.

– Save yourselves! It’s drowning! It’s drowning! Mr Whiskers suddenly called out.

– What’s drowning? Snips asked.

– The ship! Hurry!

– How do you know?

– It’s taking water. Look: we’re high, high up and there is water even here.

– That? That’s the swimming pool.

– You mean to say there’s supposed to be water on the ship?

– Yes, that’s where people go when they feel like swimming.

– Oh... right. The sea isn’t big enough for them, is it? Munch said.

– Twisted minds, Mr Whiskers mumbled.

Then, a cloud passed, and the moon shone brightly. On a rail, we could see a bird, a seagull.

– Look out! Somebody’s coming! von Gulp called out to her.

But she didn’t move. The sailor passed.

– That’s an idea, too, I have to admit, Wilfred II whispered to Wilfred III. Next time we see people, we’ll just line up and sit still. I didn’t think it could work that well.

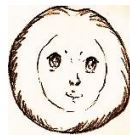
– You really should be more careful, von Gulp went to her. You never know what to expect from people.

The seagull says nothing.

– Nice day today.

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Silence.

— Pleasant wind, not too cold... My name is von Gulp, what's yours? You don't want to tell me your name? Afraid I'll steal it? Don't you talk to other seagulls? Can't blame you, I have never talked to another seagull, either, and now that we're here talking, I think they're not the nicest birds to have a chat with.

— What did you say? the seagull turned.

— Oh, you heard that, did you? von Gulp said.

— Heard what?

— That.

— I don't hear very well.

— What don't you hear?

— Well, if I knew it, it would mean I heard it, wouldn't it?

— Why don't you hear?

— I don't know.

— Before my friends got me glasses, I couldn't see very well, either. I used to have a hard time landing on water.

— What did you say?

— I said... Oh, never mind.

Suddenly, a door opened below, the chef walked out and yelled something.

— *"I can't hear you, use the speaker!"* a man answered.

The chef takes a little cone to his lips, and his voice echoes throughout the ship:

— *"Get back here and do the dishes!"*

— *"I wish I hadn't heard that,"* the man mumbled.

— *"And I've made a raspberry tart, just for us tonight,"* the chef went on, *"so hurry!"*

— That's it! That's what you need! von Gulp jumped on the rail.

— Thank you, but I'm not hungry, she answered.

— No! I mean the little cone which makes voices sound louder.

— But how do we get the cone from the kitchen?

— Leave it up to me, Snips grinned, and moved his whiskers in a devilish sort of way.

— Mr Whiskers, Fritz, will you help?

— Sure, any time.

We sat at the window and watched Snips go in, while the chef and the others were eating. The cone was on the table, next to the chef.

Snips jumped up on a counter, and ran across it and back, but no one noticed him. He ran again, but nothing. He picked up a spoon and hit the pots and pans.

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– *“It’s the rat! Get the rat! A rat in my kitchen!”*

While the men jumped up and tried to catch Snips, Fritz climbed on the table and pushed the cone down. Mr Whiskers caught it and started dragging it on the floor.

– *“Another rat! Get the other rat!”*

Then all of a sudden the door opened, and the Baroness came in in her nightgown.

– *“I thought I heard noises. Is everything all right?”*

– *“Oh, yes, just us and the rats. I mean bats. I mean hats. Our hats. What would a chef be without his hat?”* the chef spoke, as he put the cone over Mr Whiskers. Mr Whiskers walked on covered by the cone, Snips guiding him:

– Right, left, more to the left. Sorry, you hit a chair. Go! Go! Coast clear!

– Good job! Theo said. Where’s Fritz?

– *“Oh, my! Raspberry tart. Might I have a little piece? My mother used to make that for me when I was little.”*

– *“Of course, of course, Baroness. Here,”* the chef took a plate and placed a piece of pie on it, with Fritz hiding in-between the raspberries.

– *“A lizard, Sir,”* one of the men whispered.

– *“A lizard?”* the Baroness asked.

– *“It’s... it’s our codename for the secret ingredient. We can’t go about divulging our secrets.”*

– *“Of course, of course. How exciting! A code name!”*

The Baroness picked up a spoon, took a piece of the pie with a few raspberries, and Fritz climbed off the spoon onto the plate.

– *“But, Baroness, I must insist you only have one teaspoon. You have your blood sugar to consider,”* the chef said and snatched the plate.

Fritz jumped off the plate, onto the rest of the pie.

– Don’t worry, I’m coming! Squeaky shouted and flew off before we could stop him.

He went in, grabbed the pie, with Fritz on it, and rushed back out.

– *“A bat! A bat!”*, the men called out.

– *“Oh, how exciting! Another secret ingredient?”*, the Baroness asked.

– *“Mais j’en peux plus, moi. Mamman! Mamman! Viens vite! Ils sont méchants avec moi!”* the chef started sobbing.

– Mmm, yummy, Squeaky said, while digging into the pie with both hands.

– How very brave of you, Don Juan said.

– Mmmm, my pleasure, Squeaky answered with his mouth full.



– Hide! They're coming! Theo called out, and everyone flew this way and that. Samson hid behind a box, while the owls all lined up on a rail, and just sat there, perfectly quiet.

– You really think this will work? Wilfred I asked Wilfred II.

– I'm sure of it. That's what the seagull did, too, and it worked marvellously for her.

– *"What a crazy night. Two rats, a lizard, and a bat."*

– *"Poor Baroness, she'll think she lost her mind,"* the two men passed by the owls, talking.

Then they stopped:

– *"Did you see something?"*

One of them took a step back, then looked to his left, where the owls were. He got close to Wilfred IV, then tilted his head to the side. Wilfred IV did the same, turning his head in the same direction.

– *"Aaaah!"*, the men took off screaming.

– *"Owls! At sea! Four of them! There is a curse on the ship!"* the men ran off.

– I think that went rather well, don't you? Wilfred II asked.

Von Gulp picked up the cone and flew over to the seagull.

– Can you hear me now? he screamed into the cone.

Down below, a few men ran off screaming:

– *"Jonas was right, the ship is haunted!"*

– Not so loud, the seagull answered.

– If you can hear me, now we can talk, von Gulp said.

– We can, but I don't see why we should.

– You won't talk to me? von Gulp asked.

– No.

– Why not?

– Because I don't know you.

– Well, if we talked, you'd get to know me, and then you'd have a better impression of me.

– My impression of you can't get any better. This is the best it will ever be.

– Why?

– Because I don't know you. I don't know if you've ever broken somebody's heart, or let someone down. I don't know if you took fish out of the water to eat, or just for fun. I don't know if you ever made fun of anyone, or played hide-and-seek with someone, and went home while they stayed hidden for two days. Or if you ever





snatched a crab from someone and hid it on a remote rock, so they couldn't find it again. Or if someone trusted you with a secret, and you told it to everyone. The more I get to know about you, the more things I'll find out, and the less I'll think of you. So I'll never think this highly of you again. Ever. We had better each go our own way, thinking the world of each other. Then, it will be as if there were only nice, kind, considerate seagulls living over the sea.

—Someone let you hide for two days? McPeck got closer to her.

The seagull nodded.

—What a mean bird! Squeaky came, with his chin covered in red raspberry sauce. But you can't call that a friend. Friends don't do that.

—And friends don't tell each other's secrets, either, Wilfred II said.

—And they don't snatch crabs from each other, Munch said. Borrow them, maybe, but then they bring them back. In good condition.

—And it doesn't matter what impression you make on them, because you don't have to impress your friends, von Gulp said.

—And you can't let them down, because you're not supposed to do something all on your own. Friends are there to help you, Theo said.

—Even when you make a big big mess of things, Squeaky said.

—And friends don't betray each other's secrets, you say? the seagull asked.

—Who would they tell? If you had a secret, all your friends would already know all about it, Wilfred IV said.

—Well, in that case, maybe we can be friends, the seagull said.

—What's your name? Wilfred III asked speaking in the cone. Friends should know each other's names.

—I don't have a name.

—Why not?

—Since I could never hear them calling me, they never gave me one.

—You have to have a name to introduce yourself, Don Juan said. How else do you chat to other birds?

—I don't.

—Ever?

—I already know everything I want to know, and there is nothing I know that I could want to share with anyone, so, that pretty much defeats the whole purpose of talking.

—But maybe other birds know something you'd like to know, but don't know, because you can't know things you don't know.

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– I'm quite happy with what I know, thank you. Perhaps another time.

– Still, you should have a name. Would you like one?

– Only if you promise not to tell it to anyone.

– Why?

– Because if I have a name and others call me, when I don't answer, they'll think I'm being rude, ignoring them on purpose.

– And isn't that what you usually do? Wilfred III whispered to Wilfred IV.

– All right, we'll give you a name, but we won't tell anybody, von Gulp said.

Now... where to find a name...

– In the reading room! Snips jumped up. Follow me!

We all followed him, but just as we were entering a hallway, we realized we were missing someone.

– The seagull! von Gulp called out.

Then he got the cone and called out to her:

– Come with us!

Up above, a sailor started screaming:

– *"Go back to your cabins! It must be a nymph, trying to lure us! Run!"*

– You really think he understood me? von Gulp turned to Theo. I said 'come with us'. He must have understood. I can't understand why he ran off like that. The reading room doesn't seem like such a bad place.

– Here you are, come on, Snips said as the seagull arrived.

– What did you say?

– I said... then Snips just signalled with his paws to follow him.

– This is the reading room. They call it the cigar room, actually. I can't understand why. There are only books on the shelves, Snips said, as we entered a room with walls covered in book-shelves.

– We'll find a good name in one of these books, for sure. Let's see.

– "War and Peace." This sounds like a serious book, Munch said, picking up a book. Names, names... How would you like Pyotr?

The seagull shook her head.

– Andrei?

She shook her head again.

– "Dr. Zhivago". Try this one, Squeaky said.

– Yevgheni?

The seagull shook her head strongly.

– Lara?





She paused.

– Yes. Lara sounds nice, doesn't it?

The seagull nodded.

– It's settled then: Lara it is, Wilfred I said.

All of a sudden the door opened and the lights went on:

– *"What's all this noise? Who's throwing books down?"*, the Baroness walked in.
"Oh, my... I must be sleeping. I'm seeing a pelican holding a book. It's Dr. Zhivago. How I love that story. I'm dreaming for sure. And owls, and seagulls. Oh, and a bat, and a duckling, and a raven, and two eagles, and a falcon. I must certainly be dreaming. I'll just lie down here, and I'll wake up in my bed," the Baroness said, and sank in an armchair.

– Sit still, everyone. Don't move. It really works, you know, Wilfred IV said.

Soon the Baroness was fast asleep, puffing away in the armchair.

– Oh, dear... what now? von Gulp asked.

– We get out of here, Munch answered.

– But we can't just leave the little Baroness here all alone, McPeck said.

– They'll wake her up in the morning, Munch replied.

– And then she'll realize she wasn't dreaming, Theo answered. We must get her to her room.

– We could use Samson's help for this one, Mr Whiskers said.

– Whistle! Dogs come when they hear whistles, Snips said.

So we all started whistling, but nothing happened.

– Use the cone! Wilfred II suggested.

Snips rolled the cone over in front of him, and whistled as loud as he could.

The Baroness jumped in her chair:

– *"Is it tea time already? Is the kettle on the stove? Oh... I'm still here. I'll just sleep a little longer."*

All of a sudden the door opened, and Samson ran inside, and rolled the carpet as he tried to stop.

– Here I am, he said, as he was trying to catch his breath. What's the Baroness doing here?

– Sleeping, Wilfred II answered.

– Oh... Why?

– She's tired, I should think, Wilfred II went on.

– But why here?

– Well, when you're tired, you're tired anywhere. There isn't one place where you are tired, and one where you're rested.

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— But why isn't she in her cabin? Whenever I get tired, I go to my pink bed with a soft velvet cushion, I don't just lie down and sleep anywhere.

— She's convinced that she's dreaming, and that she'll wake up in her bed.

— But she won't.

— That's the problem.

— Yes, she'll be very disappointed in the morning, Samson said gravely.

— And that's why we need your help. We have to get her to her room.

— Oh, all right, Samson said, and jumped over, got a hold of the Baroness' nightgown and started pulling.

— "Hmmm?"

The Baroness opened her eyes for a brief second, then went back to sleep.

— It's not working, Samson whispered.

— Maybe if we took her with the armchair.

— I can't bite that, it's wood. The last time I chewed on something made of wood, my mistress was very upset. I don't understand why, it was a very ugly chair.

— We could pull the armchair with the rug, Wilfred I suggested.

— We could do that. We don't have to climb any stairs to get to the Baroness' cabin, Samson agreed.

Mr Whiskers and Snips kept the door open, as Samson and the birds pulled the rug with the armchair on it.

— "Aaaah! Run! It's the nymph! Look, she's inside!" a man screamed from outside, and we could see him through the window as he was running off.

— Finally, here we are. Now what?

We reached the cabin, and Samson opened the door. We pulled the armchair close to the bed.

— I know! Fritz said.

He got up on a table and found a sewing needle. Then he climbed the armchair and stung the Baroness, who jumped up. Samson came from behind, and pushed her over the bed.

— "I knew I was dreaming. Oh, you're still here. Good night."

— Good night, Baroness, we answered, as we went out.

— We can't just leave the armchair here, though. Let's pull it a few doors down. There.

— Thank you, Samson, Theo said.

— You haven't met our new friend: this is Lara, Squeaky introduced her.

— Hello, how do you do.





Lara didn't answer.

– She doesn't want to talk to me? Samson asked.

– No, she's a little deaf. Use the cone, Don Juan pointed to it.

– Hello! Samson barked loudly, and a door opened.

– *"Who's there?"*

– Just sit still, Wilfred II said.

– *"Honey, come see! It's those owls again. And they brought a chair, too. I think they want to talk."*

– *"You can talk to birds, but you can't talk to me! The minute we get back, I'm having you committed. I've had it!"*

– *"Come look."*

– *"No! It's almost morning. I'm going back to sleep!"*

– *"And there is a pelican, too, and a raven, and two seagulls."*

– *"Do you also see monkeys jumping around, or giraffes?"*

– *"I'm serious!"*

– *"Close the door and go back to sleep."*

– *"But – "*

– *"Sleep."*

– We should get back now. It's almost daybreak, Wilfred I said.

– Where do you live? von Gulp asked Lara.

– Here and there. Ships, rocks.

– Why don't you come with us?

– Why would I?

– If you come with us, no one else around here will find out your name, Squeaky said.

– Where are you going?

– Up North.

– Are there a lot of birds there?

– Not a lot.

– All right, I'll come.

– Is there anyone you'd like to say goodbye to?

– No.

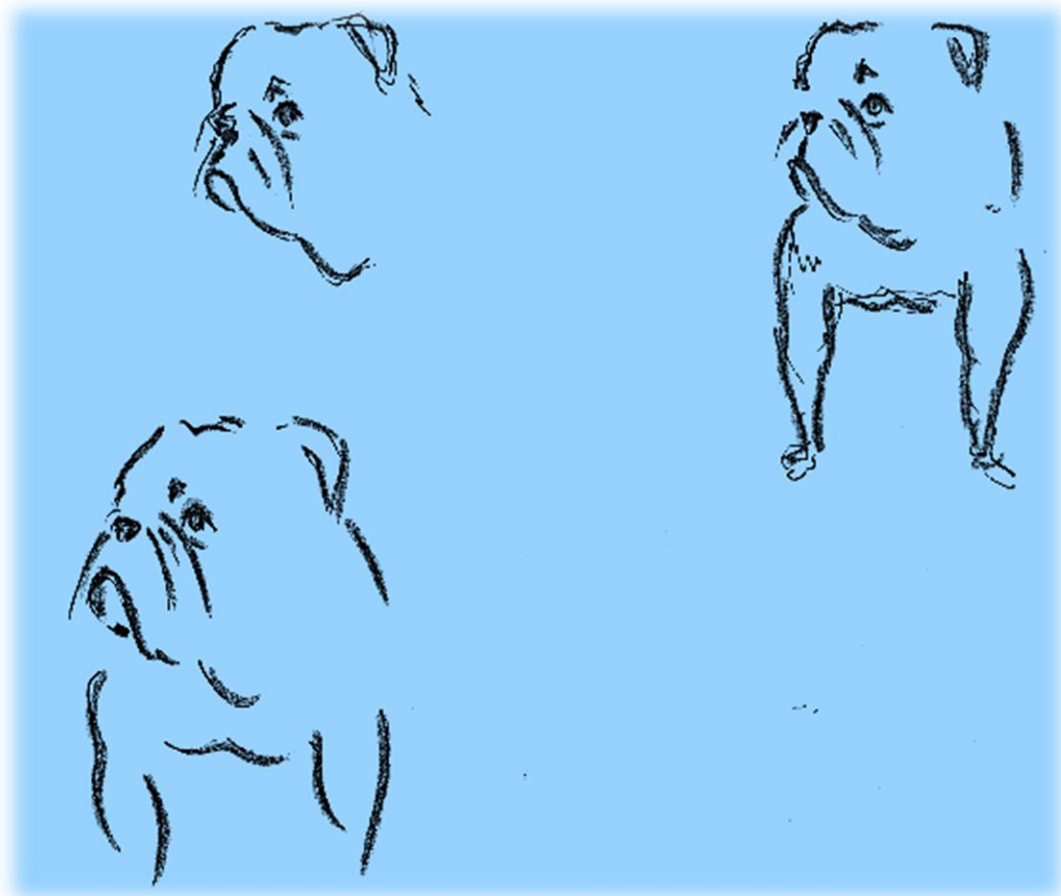
– All right, this way then, von Gulp put the cone over his head by a thread attached to it, and we followed Snips back to the room.

– We'll be sleeping during the day, so that people don't notice us, and in the evening we'll have breakfast and go out.





- You have breakfast in the evening?
- Yes, it's much more fun to have breakfast. More so than lunch, or dinner, or supper. So we have breakfast every time we eat, Wilfred IV explained.
- All right, Lara answered.
- Sleep well, von Gulp whispered in the cone.
- All right, Lara answered.
- Not very talkative, this one, Wilfred III whispered to Wilfred IV.
- She's just a little out of practice, Wilfred IV replied.





We slept marvellously well through the day. Snips woke us up in the evening with fresh cake and toast and butter.

– Wake up, Lara, von Gulp whispered to Lara, who was still fast asleep.

– Wake up, he whispered again. But nothing happened.

– Use the cone, McPeck suggested.

– Wake up! he said, and she opened her eyes and stretched.

– Did you sleep well?

She nodded.

We all sat down to have breakfast.

– Do you have any friends or family? Theo asked.

Lara didn't answer. Von Gulp passed him the cone and Theo repeated the question.

Lara shook her head.

– Why not?

– Nobody wants to talk to me.

– Why not?

– Because I don't answer back, I suppose. But if I have nothing to say, I prefer to say nothing at all. I don't see the point in talking about things one doesn't know. It won't make one any more knowledgeable.

– So much for chit-chat, Wilfred III whispered to Wilfred IV.

– What about your mummy? McPeck asked.

Lara didn't answer, so Theo passed on the cone. Wilfred I laid it down next to McPeck who repeated the question.

– I don't have one, Lara answered.

– Everyone has a mummy.

– I'm not like everyone else.

– How were you born?

– I don't know, I don't remember.

– Who kept you warm until you hatched?

– A swan, by mistake. When I came out of my shell, she chased me away.

– We can't carry this awful cone with us everywhere, we've got to think of something else, Attila said.

– I've got an idea, Snips said. There is this old man in a cabin not far from the Baroness, and he wears this little thing around his ear. Without it he's completely deaf. I was climbing his night table one night, and I came across that little piece of





machinery. It was making a high-pitched sound. As I got closer, the old man snored and talked in his sleep, and everything sounded fifty times louder.

– That's what we need, then! Theo said.

We all agreed we needed to sneak into the old man's room, and borrow the hearing machine – for a long time. Samson was there to lead the way, so off we went.

– Wait! von Gulp called out. Lara! he called out to her. Then he used the cone, and she followed. Samson sniffed the hallway first.

All of a sudden he came running:

– Hide! Someone's coming!

– “No more birds tonight, please. And I don't know how you brought that armchair in front of our door, but please don't do it again,” a woman said.

– “It wasn't me, it was the birds,” a man answered.

– “Not them again.”

– “Did you say birds?” the Baroness opened the door. “I had the strangest dream last night. I was in the reading room and I saw a pelican reading Dr. Zhivago. And there were more birds there.”

– “Owls?”

– “Yes.”

– “And eagles?”

– “Yes.”

– “And seagulls?”

– “How do you know?”

– “I saw them, too,” the man jumped up and down.

– “How peculiar. We dreamt the same thing. I wonder if the chef uses fresh ingredients...”

– “I saw them! I did. Last night! They were...”

– “Enough!” the woman screamed. “Into the room! Good night, Baroness.”

– “She saw them,” the man said.

– “Well, what a reliable witness you have. Now go to sleep.”

– There, that's the door, Snips said.

Samson pushed his head against it, but it didn't move. He hit the door, and scratched it, but nothing. Then the door opened and a bent over little man asked:

– “Anyone there? Oh, dear, I must be hearing things again. But I won't put on my hearing aid now. I'll go to sleep.”

Just before the door closed, Mr Whiskers and Snips sneaked in. When the old man was asleep, they opened the door.





—Up there, on the night table.

Squeaky flew up, but just as he was reaching for it, the man reached out and turned the light on.

—*"I keep hearing these noises... Like wings, and birds. But that's impossible. And... Oh, my, a bat. Hello, there. How did you get in?"*

—Hello. Through the door.

—*"I'm dreaming, obviously. I'll just go back to sleep. What are you doing with my hearing aid?"*

—I'm taking it for a friend who is deaf.

—*"Oh, never mind, it's just a dream. And I can always get another one... If it means that much to you, take it."*

—Thank you, Squeaky said, and grabbed it.

—*"Good night, birds,"* the old man said, and started snoring in no time.

—Good night, we answered, on our way out, and just as we left the room, the door slammed shut, and the old man was startled and screamed:

—*"Who's there?"*

—Hide, someone's coming!

—*"Grandpa, are you all right?"*

A young woman ran up and knocked.

—*"Grandpa?"*

No answer, so she went in.

—*"Grandpa, why don't you answer?"*

—*"What did you say?"*

—*"Put on your hearing aid."*

—*"What?"*

—*"Your hearing aid!"* the woman called out.

—*"I can't."*

—*"Why not?"*

—*"I gave it to a bat. He really needed it."*

—*"Just one bat, was it?"*

—*"No, owls, and eagles, and a raven, and a pelican, seagulls, a duckling, a falcon..."*

—*"Really... is this the age to start telling tall tales? Go back to sleep, we'll see what we can do about it in the morning,"* the woman said. *"Listen to that, birds and bats... What's next? Mice?"* she went on talking to herself.

—Well, try it on.

—How?





— The round piece... just arrange it among the feathers. There. Can you hear me now? von Gulp called out.

— Not so loud, Lara said.

— You can hear?

— I can. I can hear you, and Samson's footsteps, and the waves, and the wind.

— You have to hear music! You haven't truly heard anything until you hear music: violins, piano, cello, Mozart said.

— But where? Theo asked.

— The Baroness! Snips said. She has a big pile of records that she listens to from time to time. She never travels without them.

— It's late, she'll be sleeping now, Attila said.

— She won't mind. Come on!

The Baroness' room was quite close, so we reached it in no time.

— Why don't we knock this time? Wilfred II suggested. She seems like a nice person, unlike many others. She even wished us good night.

— We can try, I suppose, Wilfred I said, and knocked with his beak.

— "Yes?" the Baroness opened the door and looked right, and left, and...

Samson barked and she looked down.

— "Oh, there you are... again. Oh, my, these dreams are getting to be a habit. No book tonight?"

— No, tonight we'd like to listen to some music, if you don't mind.

— "Come in, come in, it's rude to keep someone at the door, even in dreams."

— Oh, my, what treasures: Vivaldi, Albinoni, Mozart, Bach... Oh, this is lovely: Bach, The Goldberg Variations. Let's listen to this one! Mozart said, picking up a record.

— "Oh, it's music tonight, is it? Fine choice, too. Here, let's put it on," the Baroness said, and picked up the record.

The piano sounded note by note.

— "I can almost hear my mother: 'Verocika, just one second, let's listen to this piece, and then we'll go feed the pigeons in Jardin des Tuileries'. What a life that was. Not half as rich or luxurious as what she had had while growing up in St. Petersburg. I was born in Paris. By that time, they had been living there for ten years. Ten years in exile, all the Russian royalty: counts, barons, working hard for every penny. I would sit on the floor, cutting out drawings from story books, having tea with bread and butter, waiting for her to finish typing on the typewriter. Then the typing would stop. Are we going, mummy? When the piano stops. All right, let's go. Got your crumbs? And then the war came... again."





We sat around the Baroness as she looked out of the window, beyond the night and the sea.

– “Are you all right, Baroness?” a woman’s voice called out.

– “Yes, fine, thank you. Reminiscing.”

– “Are the birds with you again?”

– “As always,” she smiled, looking at us.

The woman went away. The record finished.

– “Well, it’s time for you to go, and me to get some rest,” the Baroness said, as she opened the door.

We left one by one.

– Bow, Munch said.

– Why? Squeaky asked.

– That’s what you do with royalty.

– “Good night!”

As we all turned around to bow and say good night, we realized Lara was still sitting in the middle of the room, her beak wide open. Snips rushed in, and pushed her towards the door.

– Oh, my, she kept sighing. So that’s music...

We walked the deck quietly.

– The ship will be reaching Stockholm tomorrow, Snips said.

– Already? von Gulp asked.

– Yes... We’ll stay there for two days, then back to Bremerhaven.

– Already... Munch sighed.

– We won’t be coming back, Wilfred I said.

– Yes, I know. You’re going North.

– So we should do something special tonight, Samson said.

– Something to remember, Snips said.

– We’ll remember it as it is, McPeck said.

– I know: a feast! Squeaky called out.

– Are you still hungry, Squeaky chap? Wilfred II asked.

– No, but I can have a feast all the same.

– I know! Samson called out: We’ll take a photo! That’s what my mistress does whenever she wants to remember something. There’s this machine, you go “click”, and a while later a photo comes out. I’ll get it!

We sat on the deck, waiting for Samson to come back.





— Here I am! All right, let's see: tall ones in the back, short ones up front. Mr Whiskers, Snips, Fritz, Vic, you'll sit in front. Lara, step into the picture.

— But I haven't been with you all the way.

— You're here now, von Gulp said.

— But if you go click, you won't be in the photo, McPeck said.

— True... Samson agreed. I know!, he said and ran off. A little while later he came with the man who had seen us the night before.

— *"Easy, boy, I'm still half sleeping, I can't walk that fast... Oh, my, it's the birds again!"*

— As you were! Samson called out to us, and gave the man the camera.

— *"You want a picture with your friends. How sweet. All right, say 'cheese' everyone!"*

— Cheese? Where? Where? Squeaky asked.

— *"Honey, you won't believe what just happened..."* the man talked as he went back to his cabin.

— Where's the photo? Munch asked.

— It takes a while for it to come out. It will probably be ready when I and my mistress get home.

— Oh, all right...

— It will be day soon, you know, Attila said.

— Yes, we should go rest, Theo agreed.

— I'll see you tomorrow evening then? Samson asked.

— Yes, tomorrow evening it is.





In the evening Snips woke us up with raspberry soufflé and biscuits and cloudberry jam.

– Hmmm, hmmm, Squeaky just couldn't get enough of the soufflé.

– Not so much. You'll get a tummy ache, Snips warned him, but nothing could stand between Squeaky and that raspberry soufflé.

"Good evening, every one, this is the Captain speaking. Due to numerous requests from passengers, we have decided to make an extra stop in Visby tomorrow. We'll be docking there tonight after a brief stop in Oland, and you'll have all day to visit the Hanseatic Town, a UNESCO site. Then the day after tomorrow we shall set sail for Stockholm," a voice announced.

– So you'll be staying an extra day, Snips jumped up.

– What's a Hanseatic Town? McPeck asked.

– A town which belongs to Hanseatic people, I suppose, Wilfred I answered.

– Vikings! Snips called out.

– Where? Theo asked.

– No, I mean Visby once belonged to Vikings.

– How do you know?

– I took a tour once. They have a museum, like a big storage house, where they keep all sorts of old things they don't use any more. And that's where I found this, Snips showed us a shiny silver coin. They said it belonged to Vikings.

– Didn't they mind you taking it? McPeck asked.

– It was just sitting there, no one needed it, and they have many more. And it's so shiny...

– Ooooooh, Squeaky groaned.

– What is it? Attila asked.

– My tummy...

– I told you not to eat so much soufflé, Snips said.

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– Well, it's too late to remind me now. What good is that doing me anyway, it won't make me feel better. Ooooh....

– At least next time you'll know not to have such a lot of raspberry soufflé, Wilfred II concluded.

– But how can something that tastes so good give me such a bad tummy ache?

– Let's fly around a little. That always makes me feel better, Lara says.

– You eat a lot of raspberry soufflé, too? Squeaky asked.

– Not a great deal, Lara smiled.

– I know! We can fly to the lighthouse! Snips said.

The ship had stopped in Oland, and we could see the light from the lighthouse going round and round. As we flew closer, we could hear birds everywhere.

– Watch out! People below!

– They're aiming at us... They've got huge glasses, look!

Down below a group of people were sitting in the bushes, looking all around.

– *"Look at this! Why, owls, eagles, and a falcon, and even a raven. Oh, and a bat, a duckling, seagulls. You're not going to believe this: a pelican! Oh, my, a parrot, too..."*

– *"Let me see, it can't be... Oh, you're right."*

– *"And the eagle is holding a rat."*

– *"What are they doing all together? You suppose Earth's magnetic poles are shifting and got them all mixed up?"*

– *"No, no, it's global warming, for sure. And to think you almost didn't want to come up here to do bird watching. 'Too late in the year for interesting things', you said."*

– Hurry! Into the lighthouse: there's an open window, Theo said.

– Hello? Wilfred I called out.

– Hello, a voice answered.

– Anyone there? we jumped up.

– Anyone there, the voice answered again.

– Where are you?

– Where are *you*? the voice asked back.

– What are you doing?

– What are *you* doing? it spoke again.

– I asked first, Wilfred I said.

– That's not fair, here I was playing the echo, and there you go saying you talked first. Of course you did, I was the echo.

– Oh, so sorry, I didn't realize it, Wilfred I said. Would you like to try again?





—No, no, the resonance is all lost now. So I suppose we might as well get acquainted. My name is Valdemar the Conqueror, the bird said, tilting his head with every word.

—What a beautiful name, McPeck said.

—A king's name, Valdemar answered proudly, tilting his head.

—Are you a king?

—Well, if the shoe fits, he said as his head went left, then right.

—What bird are you?

—A mighty cormorant, I am.

—Why do you turn your head sideways when you speak?

—Do I? he asked tilting his head.

—You do.

—How? I feel nothing. Maybe you're tilting your head and it just looks as if I were tilting mine. What brings you here, anyways?

—Our friend has a tummy ache.

—What did you do? Did you eat too many berries?

—How did you know? Squeaky asked.

—Happens to me all the time. I just can't stop picking them. One, and then another, and another. Blueberry soup!

—No, raspberry soufflé.

—No, blueberry soup.

—I'm telling you I had raspberry soufflé.

—But now you need blueberry soup.

—No more berries, Squeaky sighed.

—We should go back, the ship is moving, Sharpsey said.

We thanked Valdemar, the mighty cormorant, and promised to find Squeaky some blueberry soup, then headed back to the ship. But we could hear an extra flutter of wings behind us.

—Are you coming with us? McPeck asked.

—To... to... to make sure you find blueberry soup.

—Won't your friends be worried?

—No.

—Sure?

—Very. I'd have to have friends, and I have none.

—None?





—No. I don't believe in friendship. A poor excuse for getting others to do you favours you never return. "Please, can I have this fish? You caught one an hour ago, as well", or "Couldn't you find another rock to sit on? I'm so tired." What good are friends, anyway.

—No friends?

—No, I like my rock, and I don't catch fish out of boredom.

—We're going to the North. We're nightcreatures, McPeck whispered to him.

—Why are you whispering?

—Because we're all friends, and you might not like that, but that's just how we nightcreatures are.

When we got back to the ship, Samson was waiting for us.

—Where did you go? Where did you go? Did you bring me anything? Samson asked, wagging his short tail.

—We brought a friend, Wilfred IV answered, introducing Valdemar.

—Oh, Samson said, a bit disappointed.

—My, what a strange creature you are, Valdemar inspected Samson closely. Your teeth stick out, and so much skin. Are you not done growing yet?

—Don't pinch me! Samson snapped. All the judges in all the competitions I've ever been in think I'm perfect. A true English Bulldog. And I have a Pedigree, too.

—What's a Pedigree?

—It's something that says my parents were pretty great, too... Hey, watch it. Oh, right there, behind the ear, Samson sighed as Valdemar scratched him. He even beat his paw against the floor.

—How very peculiar, Valdemar concluded.

—Blueberry soup, please? Squeaky interrupted.

—Oh, right, Squeaky chap. Come on, off we go to find blueberry soup, then, Wilfred II said. We can all pinch each other some other time, Wilfred II went on.

We searched the kitchen and the pantry, but no trace of blueberry soup.

Suddenly the ship shook.

—We must have docked, Snips said and ran outside.

He returned a few minutes later:

—Visby!

—We might have better luck finding blueberry soup there, Mozart suggested.

—Where do you usually find blueberry soup? McPeck asked Valdemar.

—People make it. I just go in, take a few sips, then I'm on my way.





— I think there were houses around that museum I visited here, Snips said. And a big, big wall all around. Very safe place, he nodded.

— Ooooh... Squeaky moaned.

— Yes, Squeaky chap, we're going, we're going, Attila said.

— Won't you sleep a little, first? Valdemar asked.

— No, we're nightcreatures.

— So you keep saying.

— We sleep during the day.

— Oh, I see... I never liked being awake during the day, anyway, hearing all those seagulls and other cormorants going on and on about the fish they caught, and the fish they didn't catch, and the whales they fought. Much better at night, when they're all sleeping.

We flew off, and soon we could see the big wall Snips was talking about.

— I see it, I see it. Keep going straight. Now right. More to the left. Not so much, Snips was giving directions.

— Over there: a light is on! Munch pointed out a house near a strange building. We landed in the building.

— "Sta Karina, church and monastery, 1233," Wilfred I read.

— 1233 what? Wilfred II asked.

— Stones, for sure, Wilfred IV answered. They probably decided to build it with as little material as possible. Cheap skins. Just look, they didn't even build a roof.

— They didn't try very hard on the walls, either, Wilfred III said.

— Look, there's someone in the kitchen, in the house over there, Valdemar pointed to the lit window.

— It looks like they're making soup, Snips said.

— We'll just wait until they finish, Munch said.

— Ooooh... Squeaky sighed.

— Maybe not, Munch said.

— If we can get them to go into the other room, we'll go in, take one of those little cups hanging there, fill it with soup and be on our way, Wilfred I said.

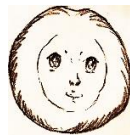
— How do we do that? von Gulp asked.

— I know, Snips said. Put me down, I'll just say "hello".

Attila put Snips down on the window pane. Snips went in, passed through the kitchen into the other room.

— "Aaaaah! Mommy! There's a rat here!"





The woman ran out of the kitchen. Theo rushed in, got a cup of soup, came back out just as Snips came through the other window. Attila grabbed him and we flew on the roof.

– “I don’t see any rat. None at all. Now sit still, I’ll have your soup in no time,” the woman said, as she walked back in the kitchen.

– “Mickey, what did you do with the cup?” the woman called out again.

– “What cup?”

– “The cup from my great-great-great-grandmother’s set. One’s missing. I told you...”

– “I didn’t touch it.”

– “Right, I guess it was the rat who took it, then.”

– It’s for a good cause, you know, Snips answered the woman.

– There you go, Squeaky, one sip at a time. It’s still warm.

– Hmmm, it’s good. Are you sure it will make me feel better?

– Guaranteed, Valdemar answered.

– Can I taste it, too? McPeck whispered to Theo.

– Of course you can. Right, Squeaky?

– Sure, here you go.

McPeck straddled over and took a sip.

– Hmmm, it’s good even without a tummy ache.

– Do you think she’ll mind if I keep the cup? It’s so nice, with blue, and gold, Snips asked.

– Nah, she has a wall full of them, and nobody seems to be drinking from them.

– We should go now, it will be day soon, Wilfred I said.

– Yes, we should, Valdemar agreed.

– I feel so much better, Squeaky smiled.

– Thank you for helping us find the blueberry soup, Theo said.

– Oh, you’re welcome. So, where are we going?

– Back to the ship, to get some sleep.

– Oooh, we’re sleeping on a ship, we are. Nightcreatures sleep in style, yes, we do, Valdemar said.

– So, you’ll be coming with us to the North, then? Wilfred IV asked.

– Yes, sure, why not. Thanks for asking. Which way to the ship?

When we were back and ready to sleep, the Captain made an announcement:

“Ladies and Gentlemen, we docked in Visby last night. Please take the day to enjoy the UNESCO heritage monument. Tonight we shall be leaving for Stockholm, our final destination.”





- We're on our own from here, Wilfred I said.
- Indeed, Snips sighed.
- Sleep well, everyone, Theo said, and looked around to see if everyone had found their places.
- Valdemar, are you happy over there?
- Oh, yes, quite fine, Valdemar answered from behind a few boxes, with his head underneath his wing.
- Snips went out for a bit, then came back with a pillow:
- Here, rest your head on this.
- Oh, thank you, but... it's so soft...





We rested well, though everyone woke up from time to time to see if the ship had set sail.

— Good morning, everyone! Snips called out from behind a huge basket full of rolls and croissants. Freshly baked, compliments from the chef.

— He said that? The chef?

— Well, not in so many words, but he meant to.

— Have we set sail yet? Squeaky asked yawning.

— In a bit. It's a short trip from here to Stockholm, Snips answered and sighed.

— Are they awake yet? Are they? Are they? Samson ran in.

— Yes, they are, Snips answered.

— Oh, good. I waited and waited for you to wake up... Samson said wagging his short tail.

— It's you again! How do you do again, Valdemar walked up to Samson, and tilted his head all the way to one side.

Samson followed and he turned his head half way:

— I'm fine, thank you. Why are you looking at me sideways?

— Me? It must be an illusion. Probably because you've tilted your head.

— I'm only following you.

Valdemar tilted his head the other way.

— Now you're going the other way, Samson said and followed. See, I'm turning my head in the same direction.

— You are? You seem fine to me.

— Enough! Theo said.

— Yes, let's eat! Squeaky exclaimed, looking at the basket.

— What did you want to tell us? Attila asked Samson.

— Oh, right, I almost forgot. And I waited and waited, and waited... What was it? Oh, yes. Where are you going now?

— Well... North.

— Yes, but which way?

— Not quite sure yet, Wilfred I said. What do you think, Vic? That forest you want to grow in— can it be a long way off?

— I've never really thought that far. I always thought I would end up to be just another chestnut tree on the side of the road. I hoped I'd get here... And here we are.

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— Yes, here we are, Snips sighed.

— The reason I'm asking is that I heard my mistress talk to the captain today. She was awfully upset. Apparently we had to catch another ship in Stockholm, and now with the extra day, we missed it, and the next one is in two days.

— Sorry to hear that. That's what you wanted to wake us up for? Wilfred II asked.

— No, no. Yes. The ship we're going to take goes to Gävle, "The Gateway to the North". That's what the ticket said. And I thought, since you're going to the North, it must be close.

— But you missed the ship, von Gulp said.

— That one, but there's another one in two days, and to make my mistress feel better, the captain agreed to stay in Port till the next ship comes, so we can stay here. My mistress can be very scary when she gets mad. Why, one time, in a competition, a poodle won first place, and it was only because she and the pageant organizer's dog were in love, it was quite obvious. My mistress got so mad, she threw cookies at the jury. I don't blame the poodle though, she couldn't help falling in love. Though her tastes were questionable, you should have seen that Afghan hound... Still not sure why they call them dogs: no cheeks, no teeth showing.

— Two more days! Snips jumped up. I know, we can visit Stockholm, the Venice of the North. I've always wanted to, but it's not easy when you have to walk among all those careless people.

— Me, too, Valdemar said.

— You walked among people? McPeck asked.

— No, no, I've always wanted to see Stockholm. Whenever I flew closer, I could see the lights reflecting in the water.

— Why didn't you?

— With all that open space and all those islands, it can't have a very good echo, Valdemar said gravely.

— Oh, look at this! The Royal Palace! Snips said dragging along a leaflet. And The Vasa Museum! It's a ship, look! Can we go? Can we?

— Of course, we should have plenty of time for everything.

— It sounds like fun, Don Juan sighed from inside his cage.

— You can come, too.

— I'll be going home tomorrow.

— We'll go tonight then, as soon as we get there.





—Really? Don Juan jumped out. Just wait till I tell the hamster about all the places I've been to. Poor thing, he's always running on this wheel they put in for him, still hoping one day he'll get to Paris.

—Why Paris? McPeck asked.

—He's heard they have good cheese there.

—Really? Squeaky asked while taking a bite out of a roll.

Then the ship moved and a horn sounded above.

—This is it. We're on our way to Stockholm.

In no time at all we were in Stockholm. We could see lights and hear ships all around.

—We've stopped! We've stopped! Can we go now? Don Juan was fluttering his wings inside his cage.

—But it's not completely dark, Munch said.

—It's almost dark, and we can make an exception this once, Theo said.

—I have the map, you have me, we're ready to go, Snips said.

—Where are we going? von Gulp asked.

—Let's go that way, Lara pointed to an island further to the right, across the water.

—Yes, let's! Vasa museum is over there.

—What's there? Wilfred II asked.

—An old ship.

—Oh... If it's a ship, why isn't it at sea?

—It sank.

—I'm not going underwater! Squeaky said startled.

—No, no, they got it out.

—What for? If it sank once, it will sink again.

—There! That's it! Snips pointed to a big building.

—"Vasa Museum. Open 9:30 am—7:00 pm." Oh, dear, it's closed, Valdemar said.

—Good.

—Good?

—Yes, then there won't be any people in there.

We sneaked in through an open window, and found ourselves face to face with a lion at one end of the ship.

—It's looking at me, Don Juan said taking a step back. I... I think it will roar soon.





– It's made of wood, see? Snips climbed up and chewed its ear off.
 – "Who's there?" we could hear footsteps up the stairs.
 We flew up to the next level.
 – "Gun deck," Wilfred I read.
 – Do you think we could go in?
 – Of course, look how nice and shiny the floor is, Snips said.
 – Careful... there could be guns here.
 – Hey, look at this: white dust! Valdemar said, pulling out a bag and spilling powder out.
 – What is it?
 Snips walked over and sniffed it:
 – It smells like baby powder.
 Then he walked on, leaving tiny footprints behind. We could hear footsteps again, so we all hid.
 – "Are you sure you heard something? Who could want to break in here? What could they do, hijack the ship and sail off?" a man laughed.
 – "Yes, look! Footprints!"
 – "Oh, dear... and how big they are."
 – "A mouse! It's a mouse! We have to catch it!"
 – "Why? Mice abandon sinking ships. If this one hopped on the ship, it means we're safe," the man laughed again.
 – "But..."
 – "Come on, go to sleep. You've been watching too many movies."
 We all came out once the men left, and we all stepped into the white powder.
 – This place has a really nice echo, Valdemar said. Hello! he called out.
 – Not now, Theo whispered.
 – "Still..." one of the men came back.
 We ran every which way.
 – "Gerhard! You have to come see this! There are footprints all over. They look like birds!"
 – "Yes, they're having a party. Come on."
 – Hello! Valdemar called out again and listened for the echo.
 – "Did you hear that?"
 – "Yes, they're rocking the boat," the other man laughed again. "Just come down."
 We flew around for a bit, and saw all the nicely covered statues and pillars.
 – They don't make ships like they used to, Snips said.





—I'm not sure that's such a bad thing, considering what happened to this one, Wilfred II whispered to Wilfred III.

—Do you think they'll mind terribly if I take one little carving with me? Snips asked.

—What do you want to take?

—That! Snips pointed to a little crown held by two lions up on the ship's stern.

—Oh, I don't know... Attila said.

—Who'll notice? People have to stand all the way back there to look at it. They'll just think it was lost at sea.

—Well, I suppose.

—Fly me over, Snips said, and as soon as he had reached the mast, he chewed around it and took the crown out. How lovely, he sighed and held it tight.

We flew back to the ship, and Snips was quiet all the way, careful not to drop his loot. When we reached our rooms, he cleared a spot in the center of the wall, and put up the crown.

—Perfect, he said happily. Thank you.

—You don't have to thank us, you did all the hard work, McPeck said.

—I just love wood, Snips sighed. It was a beautiful ship, wasn't it?

We all nodded.

—Great echo, too, Valdemar agreed.

—Tomorrow we'll visit the palace.

—Tomorrow I'm going home, Don Juan said. Thank you for tonight. And the other nights.

—Thank you for coming with us, McPeck smiled.

—Even when I'm in my cage, I'll still feel like a nightcreature.

We went to bed early. After all, we are getting close to the North, and we need our strength. Who knows what we'll find there.





– Good morning! Up! up! up! Snips called out, as he pushed a big basket into the room. Pastries for everyone, and then we're off to see the Palace, right? Right?

– Yes, Wilfred I answered and yawned.

– It's not even dark yet, Wilfred II said.

– It will be by the time we leave. Days last less here.

– The ship for Gävle will be here tomorrow morning, and it will leave at night, Samson said as he came in.

– This is our last adventure, then, Snips sighed.

– We had better get going, we have a lot to see today, Theo said.

Attila picked up Snips, who was holding the map and giving directions.

– This is it! Next to the park.

We landed in a beautiful park with nicely trimmed hedges.

– Look out! Valdemar called out, pointing to a little girl who had walked past us, up to an old woman sitting on a bench.

– *"Would you like to feed the pigeons, too?"* the old woman asked the little girl. She nodded.

– *"Cookie crumbs for the tan ones, bread for the grey"*, the old woman said, as she gave the little girl two handfuls of crumbs.

The little girl put them down in two separate piles, and tan pigeons ate the cookie crumbs, grey pigeons the bread crumbs. Munch walked up to the cookie crumb pile:

– Hmmm, not bad.

– Watch out, another one! a pigeon called out.

– Oh, not again... I'm getting too old for this. Fly off, everyone! another pigeon said.

A little boy came running down the path, chasing all the pigeons away. Then he reached Munch who was quietly picking up crumbs.

– *"Aaaah!"* the little boy screamed.

– Aaaah! Munch screamed, startled.

– *"Aaaah!"*

– Aaaaah!

– *"Mummy, mummy, a huge bird with a big beak tried to swallow me!"*

– Aaaaah!



– Watch out, Munch, someone's coming, Theo warned.

Two men walked up to the old woman:

– *"Winter is coming, you can't stay out here."*

– *"I have to feed the birds."*

– *"At least come to the shelter at night. And take these blankets to keep warm."*

– *"Thank you."*

The men walked away.

– What a nice lady, McPeck says, and walks over to her.

– McPeck, no! Wait! Munch yells.

– *"Oh, my, a little duckling. What are you doing up North at this time of the year? You'll be very cold..."* the old woman said and took a blanket.

Squeaky walked up to see what she was doing. One by one, we joined them. The woman looked at us, and counted us, then got something out of her bag and started working on the blankets.

– *"There, these will keep you warm,"* she said as she put capes on each of the birds.

We all thanked her and flew off, just as the same men walked back.

– *"Where are the blankets we gave you?"*

– *"I made coats for the birds."*

– *"Why did you give them your blankets?"*

– *"They needed them more than I do."*

– People should be out of the palace by now. Shall we go have a look? Snips asked.

We land on a roof near the palace for a minute, to admire the scenery and the water.

– The North isn't such a bad place, Munch said.

– People here are nice, too, Mozart said.

– Well, they certainly are different, Valdemar concluded.

– Different? McPeck asked.

– Yes, I haven't seen many people up on the rooftops in other places.

– And you have, here? Theo asked.

– Yes.

– Where?

– Right behind you.

We turned around to see a long line of people walking carefully.

– *"What a great idea for a tour. Now this is what I call a view."*

– *"They should do this in Paris."*

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- "Hey, look over there!"
- "What? Where?"
- "Watch your step, you'll trip."
- "Look!"
- "Are you trying to get us killed?"
- "Just look at the birds!"
- "Birds? Of course there are birds up here. Now keep walking and stop chasing birds."

We flew around the palace once, and stopped in the garden to rest. We found a tree, and made sure there were no people in it. Just as we were listening to the water, we heard a sigh from down below. Under the tree, a black cat was sitting quietly.

- What is it? What's wrong? McPeck went over to the cat.
- Nobody likes me.

– That's just what you think. I used to think so, too. Then I found my friends, and I don't think so any more, Squeaky said.

- No, it's true. Nobody likes me. Look.

The cat went out and walked in front of a man on the sidewalk. The man took three steps back and crossed the street.

- See?
- I know. Wait here a little, Theo said and flew all through the garden. He returned carrying a bucket of white paint. The cat took a step back.
- Dip your tail in here, Theo said.
- What good will that do?
- Try it.

The cat dipped her tail and painted it half white.

- Now try walking in front of that man with the hat.

The cat went over and crossed the man's path. Nothing happened, the man went on walking. Then she crossed a woman's path, and nothing happened. She was so happy that she walked up to everyone to say 'hello'. Some even bent down to pet her.

– "Mummy, look how sweet the kitty is. She likes being petted. Why don't we take her home?"

- "Don't you want the Siamese cat at the Mall? It's fluffy and grey. This one's black."
- "No, she has a white tail. I like this one."
- "All right. Let's see if it wants to go with us" a woman said, and reached out to

her.

The cat jumped in her arms and started purring.

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– “I guess she does.”

As they were walking away, the cat thanked us and waved.

We flew around a bit before going back to the ship.

– What’s here? Lara asked.

– “Kungliga Myntkabinettet,” Theo read.

– What’s that? Wilfred I asked.

– No idea.

– A little peek, perhaps? Snips wondered.

– We could go in, Attila agreed, and we sneaked in through an open window.

Inside there were glass cases with all sorts of metal pieces. In a case all of its own, there was a big square piece with a circle in the middle. Next to it there was a little inscription: “World’s largest stamped coin, 1644”.

– How nice and shiny it is, Snips looked at it. Do you think anyone would mind?

– I don’t think they use it much any more, Wilfred I said.

Snips opened the case and sneaked in, took the coin and dragged it out. Suddenly the lights went on, and a loud noise started everywhere.

– “A burglar! Hurry!”

Attila grabbed Snips, and we flew out as fast as we could.

– Did you hear that? There was a burglar in there, Snips said amazed.

– Do you think they got upset we took the coin? McPeck asked.

– No, it wasn’t that. If they cared so much about it, they wouldn’t have left it there, all by itself, Snips said holding the stamped coin.

We went back towards the palace, and then headed for port, but as we were passing a large statue, we noticed a large group of pigeons. We stopped to see what was going on.

– Hello, Munch said.

– Shh! a pigeon replied.

– Why?

– Council meeting.

– Oooh, what are you discussing?

– This, that, the weather, the sun.

– All those who are not here say ‘Aye’, an older pigeon spoke.

Silence.

– Good, everyone is here.

– Why are you discussing things you can’t do anything about?





– Who said anything about doing anything about them?
 – Why do you have a council meeting, then?
 – If we didn't have meetings, how would we ever meet all together like this?
 – Are the crows invited, too? Munch asked, pointing to a group of crows nearby.

– No, they're too noisy. Always complaining about something. One day the days are too short, next day the nights are too long. Never happy with anything.

When the meeting is over, the pigeons begin to fly away. Just then Mozart coughs a little. Then he begins to sing, and one by one the pigeons come back, and the crows come closer. When he finishes his song, they fly away.

The ship is still in port. Snips rushes below to hide his loot.

– Perhaps we should sleep on the upper deck until morning, so we see the next ship when it arrives.

– We can, Snips says.

He runs back down, and comes back with a few pillows.

Just as we were getting ready to doze off, a little kitten started meowing her heart out. She was close to the ship, and Sharpsey flew over.

– What's wrong?

– I have something important to say.

– What is it?

– I don't know yet, but when I find out I want everyone to pay attention.

– I see...

A little while later, the meowing starts again.

– Have you found it?

– No, just practising.

– I don't mean to be rude, but it's been a long night. Could you maybe practice a little further off?

– Yes, of course. Could you help me cross the street? I'm not allowed to cross it.

– How did you get here then?

– I sneaked away, but shh, mummy doesn't know.

– Won't your mummy be upset with you?

– Why?

– For disobeying.

– Disobeying? Me?

– Yes, you crossed the street.

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– She doesn't know that. It's not disobeying if she doesn't find out.
 – If I fly you across, you have to promise never to cross this street again. And a promise is a promise, you have to keep it, no matter who does or doesn't know about it.

– All right.
 Sharpsey flies the kitten across.
 A few hours later the meowing comes from a different direction.
 – You've broken your promise!
 – I have not.
 – You crossed the street.
 – Not that street, I haven't. I didn't make any promises about this one.
 – Spots! Spots! There you are! a voice came from one of the houses. Stay there, don't move, I'm coming to get you.

– Mummy...
 Sharpsey flew over, got the kitten, and took her to her mother.
 – Where have you been? We've been looking everywhere for you. How would you feel if we disappeared in the middle of the night, and you looked and looked for us, and couldn't find us? the other cat asked.

– You were worried? Spots pouted.
 – Of course we were.
 – I'm sorry.
 Spots' mother thanked Sharpsey, and we got a little rest before dawn.
 As the sun was coming up, a loud siren woke us up.
 – It's the ship! It's the ship! Samson wagged his tail.
 – Yes, it is, Snips sighed.
 – We should go before the sun rises completely and people wake up, Theo said.
 – Thank you so much for having us, Mr Whiskers said, and shook Snips' hands.

– Thank you for showing me so many places.
 – Perhaps, when we settle down, you can come visit, Wilfred II said.
 – Definitely, if you have cruise ships there.
 As the other ship had docked, we took off, waving goodbye to Snips and following Samson and his mistress. We found a hidden place on board, and Samson stood guard to make sure we were safe.

The ship spent the day in Stockholm. When it got dark, passengers went to their cabins, and we could hear two men talking on a deck below:





— *"If we leave in a few hours, we'll be in Gävle in the morning."*

When it got dark, we came out to stretch our wings, and Samson came proudly carrying a basket.

— What have you got there? Valdemar asked.

— Breakfast! I got it from the captain's cabin. I'm not sure what they are, these cans are hard to open.

Theo carefully inspected the cans:

— "Caviar".

He pulled a little tin ear on the lid, and the can opened.

— Ingenious! Wilfred I exclaimed.

— I got some dry bread, too.

The little round bits in the cans were a bit salty, but they made for a good breakfast. As we were waiting for the ship to set sail, we noticed a bird leaning over a rock.

— Are you all right? McPeck flew over.

— No, you must be mistaking me. I'm a Fulmar.

— You look like a seagull.

— I'm a Fulmar, I tell you.

— But you look just like a seagull.

— Some things can't be helped.

— Do you have any Fulmar friends?

— No, I only have one friend. My best friend.

— Where?

— Right here.

— Where?

— I'm sitting on him.

— Is that how you Fulmars make friends? Where is he? I can only see a rock.

— Yes, that's him.

— But... What can you do with a rock?

— What do you mean?

— Your best friend can't be a rock.

— Sure he can. I tell him all my secrets, and he has never told a soul. I can tell him anything, and it's safe with him. And he never criticizes me, he stays with me through all the storms.

— Were you telling him a secret just now?

— Yes.

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– What were you telling him?
 – I can't tell you.
 – Why not?
 – If you don't already know it, it means we're not friends, and if we're not friends, why would I tell you?

Suddenly the ship moved.

– Come on, McPeck, we're leaving!
 – Don't you want to come with us, Mr Fulmar?
 – No, thank you, I'm quite happy in my park.
 – Here?
 – A little way off.
 – Are there trees in your park?
 – No, just birds and rocks. But no rock like my friend. I only come over when I have something important to tell him.

– I have to go now, Mr Fulmar, we're going to the North.
 – Have a safe trip. It won't be a very long one. And they have a lot of rocks there. You'll make some wonderful friends.

McPeck flew back to the ship, and we stood on deck admiring the scenery, the sea on one side, the coast on the other.

– Will you be all right from here? Samson asked.
 – Of course, we've got our blankets, and we've got Vic. We just have to figure out where we're going, Wilfred IV said.

After a while the ship slowed down, and we could see something on the coast.

– It seems to be a river, a large river, Attila said.
 – What's that noise? Munch asked.
 – Geese! McPeck said. I remember, we once flew with some geese. Very talkative.

The ship nearly stopped.

– I think we have to go and see what's going on, von Gulp said.
 We flew over and landed in the middle of a noisy group of ganders. They were talking to each other.

– Perhaps we shouldn't tell him. He'll just tell everyone if we do.
 – Oh, how I hate being left out. I hate it, I hate it! a little gander was stamping his feet.



Finally they decided to tell him, but they had hardly finished doing so when the little gander flew off from tree to tree, telling everyone. When he came back, an older bird asked him:

—Now, what did you do that for? Can't you keep a secret?

—If everyone already knows, then there is no one they can tell, and they're bound to keep it, the little gander answers.

—He has a point.

—Yes, he's right, the others agree.

Further down, two birds are talking to each other:

—Thank you!

—You're welcome.

—Thank you!

—You're welcome.

—Why are you thanking him so many times? McPeck asks.

—I just like hearing that I'm welcome.

—Do you know what it is he's thanking you for?

—No.

—Then why do you keep saying "you're welcome"?

—It's the polite thing to do.

—We've got company! a goose says, pointing to us.

—Oh, hello, the ganders greet us.

—Hello. We were just passing through when we noticed this place. What is here?

—Here? The delta, of course. It's where the Dal river joins the sea.

—A delta. How interesting, Munch says.

—I'm Arnbjörg, a goose walked up to us, and this is my brother Arne.

We introduced ourselves.

—Have you asked them where they're going? Arne asked Arnbjörg.

—It's not polite.

—But don't you want to know?

—It's none of our business. Besides, they're the ones who'll get to wherever they're going. *They'll* have to deal with it, not us.

—Yes... But if we knew, we could imagine what it was like. Almost like going there ourselves.

—Why? Do you want to leave? Don't like my cooking? You just have to say so, you know.





- I don't want to leave.
 - Good, then there's no point in asking, is there?
 - We're going to the North, Valdemar said.
 - You're headed in the right direction, a gander laughed.
 - More North than this?
 - We... don't know. We have to find a place for Vic to grow roots.
 - Oh, I see... You need to find the grouse. He's going to a place like that.
 - He passed through today. He probably stopped on the big island to rest. Ask for him there, Arne pointed the way.
 - We should go say goodbye to Samson, Squeaky said.
- We flew back to the ship and found Samson on deck.
- Well? Well? You're going... Well... Samson sighed.
 - It's been fun, though, hasn't it? Valdemar walked up to him and pinched his cheek.
 - Yes... Samson mumbled.
 - We'll be all right from here. We heard of a bird who's going to the same place.
 - Be careful, and, as my mistress says: if you have to bite someone, at least pick someone you know, so he doesn't take it the wrong way.
 - What does she mean? Fritz asked.
 - I don't know, I think she just doesn't want me biting strangers. You had better go, the sun will be up soon.
 - It was very nice meeting you, Munch said.
 - A real pleasure, von Gulp agreed.
 - Absolutely, Valdemar put his wing on Samson's shoulder and tilted his head.
 - It was nice meeting you, too, Samson lowered his head and wagged his short tail.
- We left, and as we were flying off, Samson called out:
- If you hear of any dog shows where you're going, come find me, I'll be there! And I'll have cookies!
- We passed a few smaller islands, and just as it was getting bright, we found the big island.
- Out of my way! Out! Out! I'm flying fast, I don't want to slow down now! Ou... Ouch! a peculiar blue bird with red eyebrows and a fuzzy head came for us, but was hit by something.
 - *"Mummy! My kite! It's in the tree now. That nasty bird tore it up!"*





– I'm nasty? There I was flying peacefully, when that monster attacked me, and I'm nasty? Ooooh, I'm getting mad! I am! I am! I'll just...

– Do you have a list? von Gulp asked.

– What would I do with a list?

– Shh, not so loud, we don't need any more trouble, Wilfred III whispered to the bird.

– Where were you in such a hurry to? Theo asked.

– I'm leaving! I am! I am! Bye bye, city, bye bye, monsters! I'm going to a reservation.

– What's that?

– It's a place they keep people out of.

– Are there other birds there?

– Oh, all sorts of birds and animals, and no people!

– And trees?

– All sorts of trees. Bigger than all the trees you've ever seen. They've been here since... since... they've always been here, that's how old they are.

– Could a chestnut tree grow there?

– Any tree could grow there. It's a very open-minded forest. And no people!

– What kind of bird are you?

– I'm a grouse.

– You're the grouse! Wilfred II jumped.

– Well... Technically speaking there are all kinds of grouses: black grouses, mountain grouses... I'm a grouse.

– We're nightcreatures, McPeck said.

– All of you?

Squeaky nodded.

– But you're all so different. Well, who am I to judge. There are all sorts of grouses, too. What do nightcreatures do?

– We fly at night, and we're friends, McPeck said.

– Oh, that sounds important.

– Can we fly with you? Theo asked the grouse.

– Of course, of course, but we have to hurry.

– Why? Is it closing?

– No. I've just had it with this city life.

– Couldn't we fly at night? Wilfred I asked.

– At night? Why?





—Less people around, Mozart said.

—True. All right, the grouse agreed. Let's just hurry now to the forest!

We all flew as fast as we could, but soon we realized we were missing something. The grouse was coming from behind:

—Hey, wait for me! Wait for me! I'm Rune, by the way. How do you do? If I fly at night, does that make me a nightcreature?

—Yes.

—And if nightcreatures fly at night and are friends, does that mean I'm your friend?

—Yes.

—Good. I've always wanted to have friends.

We landed in a patch of forest, and were finding a good place to spend the day in, when, all of a sudden, Rune started saying:

—Oh, dear. Oh, dear.

—What's wrong?

—I have a problem. My very existence depends on it.

—What is it?

—If I'm a nightcreature, am I still a grouse?

—Yes, of course.

—Oh, good. Just think about it: my mummy is a grouse, my daddy is a grouse.

What a predicament we would have found ourselves in if I were not a grouse... Rune said gravely.

We spent the day safely tucked away, and when it got dark Attila and Valdemar fished, and Theo cooked.

—So, which way? von Gulp asked.

—We follow the river till we pass a bridge, Rune answered.

We flew along the Dal river, looking at trees and passing by houses here and there, until we reached a bridge over the river.

—What now? Munch asked.

—We have to find the little red farm on the right, next to the forest. A hare will meet us there.

—Where do we go from there?

—I don't know, that's why we're meeting the hare, he'll tell us.

—We're following a bird who doesn't know where he's going, Wilfred II whispered to Wilfred III. Who's crazier here?

—You don't know where we're going? Wilfred IV asked.

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—No, but I know who to ask.

Soon enough we found the red house, and Rune led the way out back.

—So, where are we supposed to meet the hare? Theo asked.

—Not the hare.

—Not the hare?

Wilfred II whispered to Wilfred III:

—This is getting interesting.

—Who then? von Gulp asked.

—The moose.

—*"Honey, come see, the moose is back. And he's playing with birds again,"* a man spoke out from inside the house.

—Oh, dear, oh, dear, they saw us! Rune said.

—They saw the moose, too, but where? Where? Munch asked.

—Here I am, a low voice spoke softly.

—Run! Hide! We've been seen!

—It's all right, they're very nice people. I greet them every morning. What brings you here?

—We'd like to see the hare.

—Oh, yes, the hare, the moose nodded.

Then there was silence. And more silence.

—The hare? Munch asked.

—Yes, the hare, the moose nodded.

We waited a little more.

—Tonight? Valdemar asked.

—The hare tonight.

We waited a bit more, while the moose grazed peacefully.

—So, you think we could go now? von Gulp asked.

—Sure.

—Would you like to show us the way?

—He's at the big oak tree at the end of the garden.

—Why didn't you just say so?

—He's not terribly sociable, he doesn't like to have strangers come and knock on his tree, the moose whispered.

—Mr Hare? Rune called out when we reached the tree.

Two long ears came out.

—You can speak, I can hear you.

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— You're not coming out?

— No!

— We'd like to know how to get to the reservation.

— Write this down: Follow the other bank of the river until you have crossed the next bridge, then cross over and follow this bank. You'll have to go across a few islands. When you cross the third bridge, you're almost there. Good luck! Don't write that down, the ears disappeared.

Just as the hare had said, we followed the river. We flew for two nights. We admired the scenery, greeted birds everywhere, until we finally reached the third bridge. After the third bridge, we reached a bigger town.

— I wonder what the name of the town is, Wilfred I said, as we landed.

— We should find out, Wilfred II agreed.

— Where do you think you're going? This way, this way, a big grey bird whose neck was half black said. Come on, come on, we haven't got all night. The reservation is this way.

— But...

— What?

— We want to know the name of the town, please.

— Gysinge. Now hurry up.

We followed the bird as she led us past another island.

— Not the next island, the one after that, that's where the bird sanctuary is.

— Pardon me, but what are you? Theo asked.

— A discoloured duck? McPeck asked.

— A loon, an Arctic loon, the bird laughed. Sigrid is my name.

— Nice to meet you.

That day we slept in the bird sanctuary.

— I like this place, Wilfred I said.

— Yeah, not bad, Munch agreed.

— Do you like it here? Mr Whiskers asked me.

— I do.

— I can't get any sleep with all these birds, Rune complained.

— We could fly a bit further down. I saw some trees, it's very pretty, Theo said.

As soon as it got dark, we flew there. It really was the perfect spot, with a forest overlooking the water, oak and birch trees everywhere.

— I really like it here.

— Where would you like to grow? Mr Whiskers asked.

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— Right here, between these trees, so I can see the sunrise and the river. And you can take shelter in the trees until I'm big enough to keep you safe.

Mr Whiskers and Fritz helped me settle in. I said goodbye, for a short while, till spring, when we meet again.

— Who's there?

— It's me, Sigurd. Oh, why did I answer? What did you hide there? a big cat started digging.

— No, you can't do that!

— In that case, you have nothing to worry about.

— But you're still digging!

— Yes, I can see a contradiction there.

— I'll... I'll... you're on my... von Gulp said.

— Mind? Please say mind. Please? Munch said.

— Llll...

— Lllunch?

— List!

— Oh, dear, here we go again.

— You'll get me a present for Christmas, really? the cat asked.

— Isn't that a sweet thought, Wilfred II whispered to Wilfred III.

All of a sudden a bunch of acorns fell over the cat.

— Oh, good, Munch sighed relieved.

— Good? Because they fell on my head?

— Trust me, you are lucky. You don't know what can happen when you make it on his... Munch made a sign with his head.

— His...? the cat asked.

— His... you know.

— His?

— The L-word.

The cat looked puzzled.

— His list! His list! Valdemar said.

— Shh, not so loud! Munch hurried to him.

— What did you put me on there for if it's so bad? Sigurd asked.

— Because you're not letting our friend grow roots, von Gulp answered.

— You make lists and drop acorns on lynxes, you have friends growing roots...

What's happening to this reservation? Färnebofjärden used to be such a nice place...

— You're a lynx? McPeck asked.

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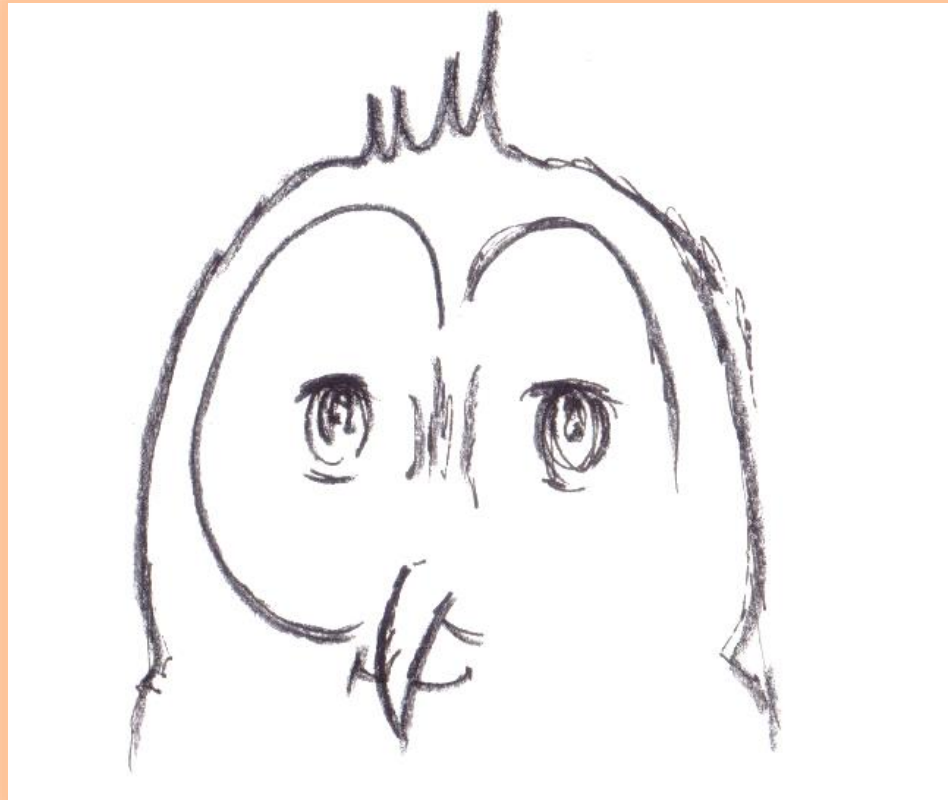


- Yes.
- What do you eat? Munch asked. Birds? Fish? Other lynxes?
- Well... I have a little problem. I can't eat anything if I've looked into its eyes.
So that greatly limits my number of choices when it comes to my diet.
- Look at me! Look at me! All right, I'm safe now, Munch said relieved.
- Are there many lynxes here? Theo asked.
- Not many. I try to keep my distance from them.
- Why? Are they mean? McPeck asked.
- It's just embarrassing to have them see me picking berries.
- Berries? Squeaky asked.
- Yes, that's why I come here. There are fields and fields of them. Of course,
winter is coming... Back to twigs and fish...
- What if we could make preserves, and you could have berries in winter? Mr
Whiskers asked.
- You could? Oh, would you? Would you?
- Of course, you'd have to keep this territory safe from other animals, so they
can't take them.
- Of course, of course, I live just beyond that bush. No problem.
- Well thought, Mr Whiskers, Wilfred I whispered to him.
- And you'd have to keep Vic safe, too. He'll grow up to become a chestnut
tree.
- A chestnut tree, how nice. We could use the diversity.





So here I am, growing slowly into the biggest chestnut tree the North has ever seen, while my friends are keeping me company. I've come a long way and I haven't forgotten any of those whom I've met along the way. And I hope this story reaches them, especially the rosebush, whom I promised I would write, for she was right: once you break a promise, you'll never keep your word again.



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- We forgot something, Wilfred I said.
- Let's see. This is the Gysinge post office, we have the map, we've made the annotations for the Owls' Encyclopaedia, Wilfred III said. What did we forget?
- The priest!
- That nice priest! Wilfred IV remembered.
- Yes, we really should send him a postcard, Wilfred II agreed.
- I'll go pick one out, Wilfred I said as he flew over and picked a card when no one was looking.

TO: The nice priest

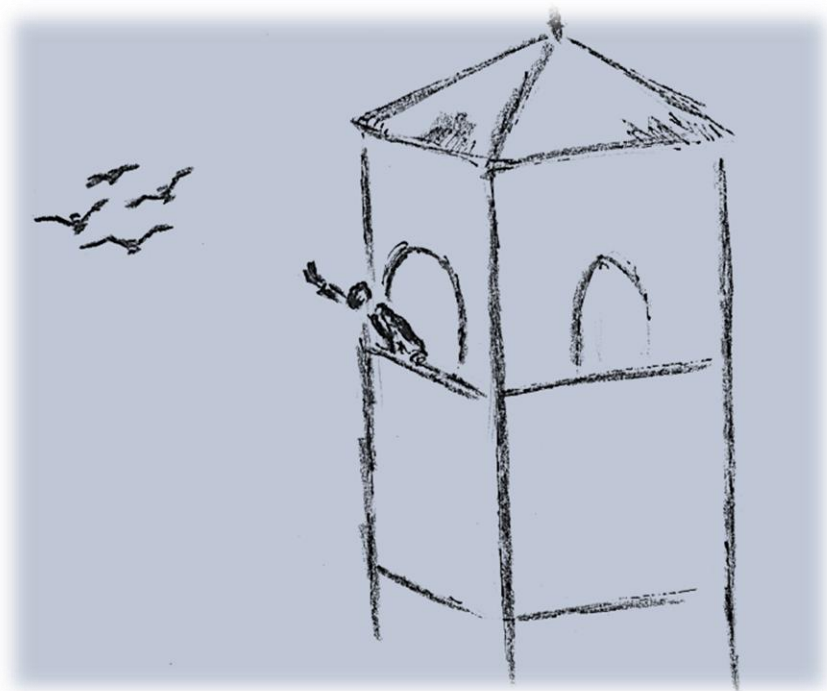
Address: Black Forest Asylum

Hello,

From: the four owls

– "Look at this. They didn't even write an address. How many asylums are there in the Black Forest? And it's signed 'the four owls'... this must be from someone who visited this Asylum, for sure," a man at the post office laughed.

– "There is only one asylum on the internet. Here, write down the code. And off it goes."



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— *"I have good news for you, priest. You and your friend are going home today. Before you leave, this came for you in the mail."*

The priest and the man who had captured Sharpsey pack their bags and leave. While walking out, the priest looks at the postcard:

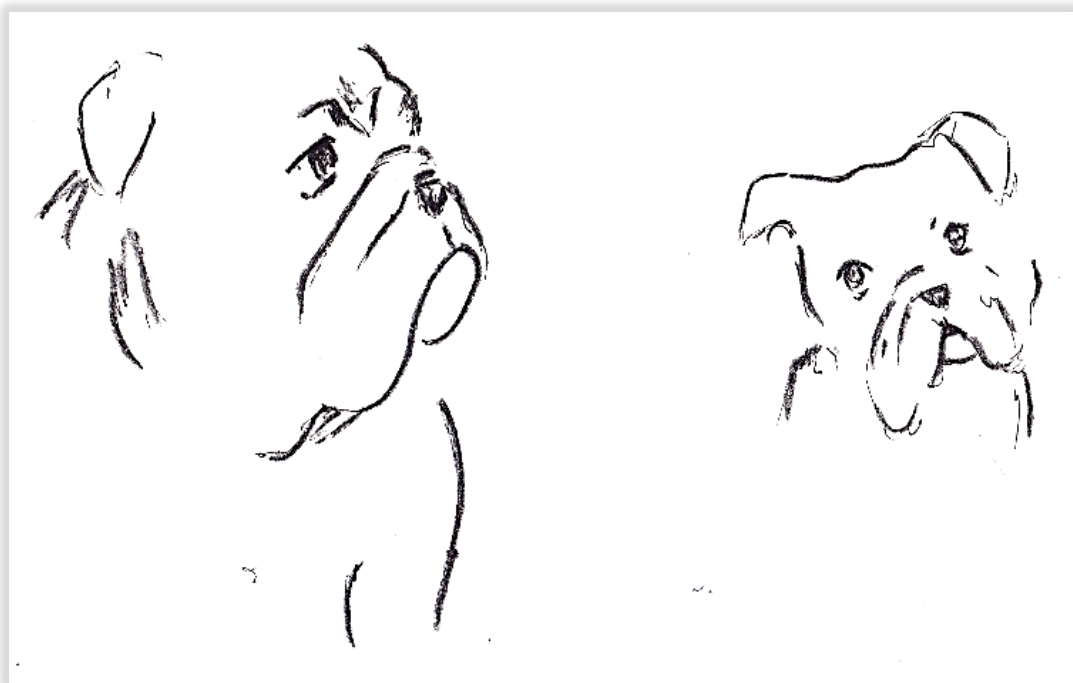
— *"It's from the owls! Look! It comes from Sweden!"*

— *"No more birds! I want back in! Let me in!"* the other man screams, while kicking the door.

The door opens.

The priest walks on.

— *"I just can't wait to get back. I'll show this to the Bishop, and to the Archbishop... On second thought, I'll keep it to myself."*





— "How did you get the idea of writing the story of a chestnut travelling to the North, to grow into a tree, Tory?"

— "It just came to me."

And, all of a sudden, birds appeared in the headlights of the car. The car stopped.

The raven took a deep bow.

The four owls waved.

The two eagles lifted a wing.

The falcon sang a few notes.

The seagulls came forth shyly.

The pelican and the cormorant posed, left and right.

The duckling and the bat flew around the car.

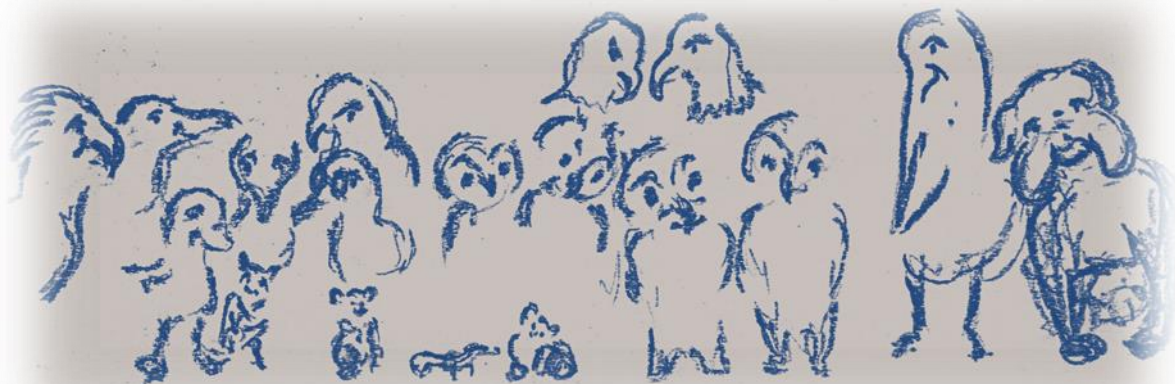
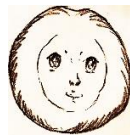
The mouse helped the lizard climb up on the hood.

They all approached the windshield together.

— May I come? Shall I come, too? I don't know, I just don't know.

— Of course you should, Rune! We're all nightcreatures.





Who are they?

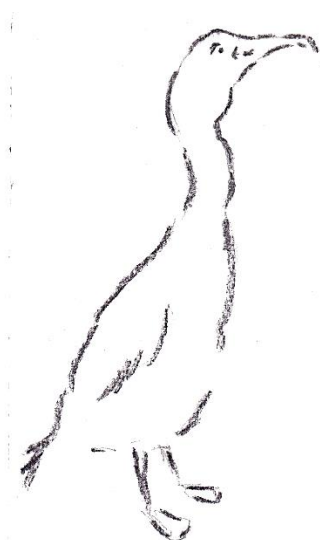
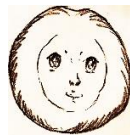
Draw with me!

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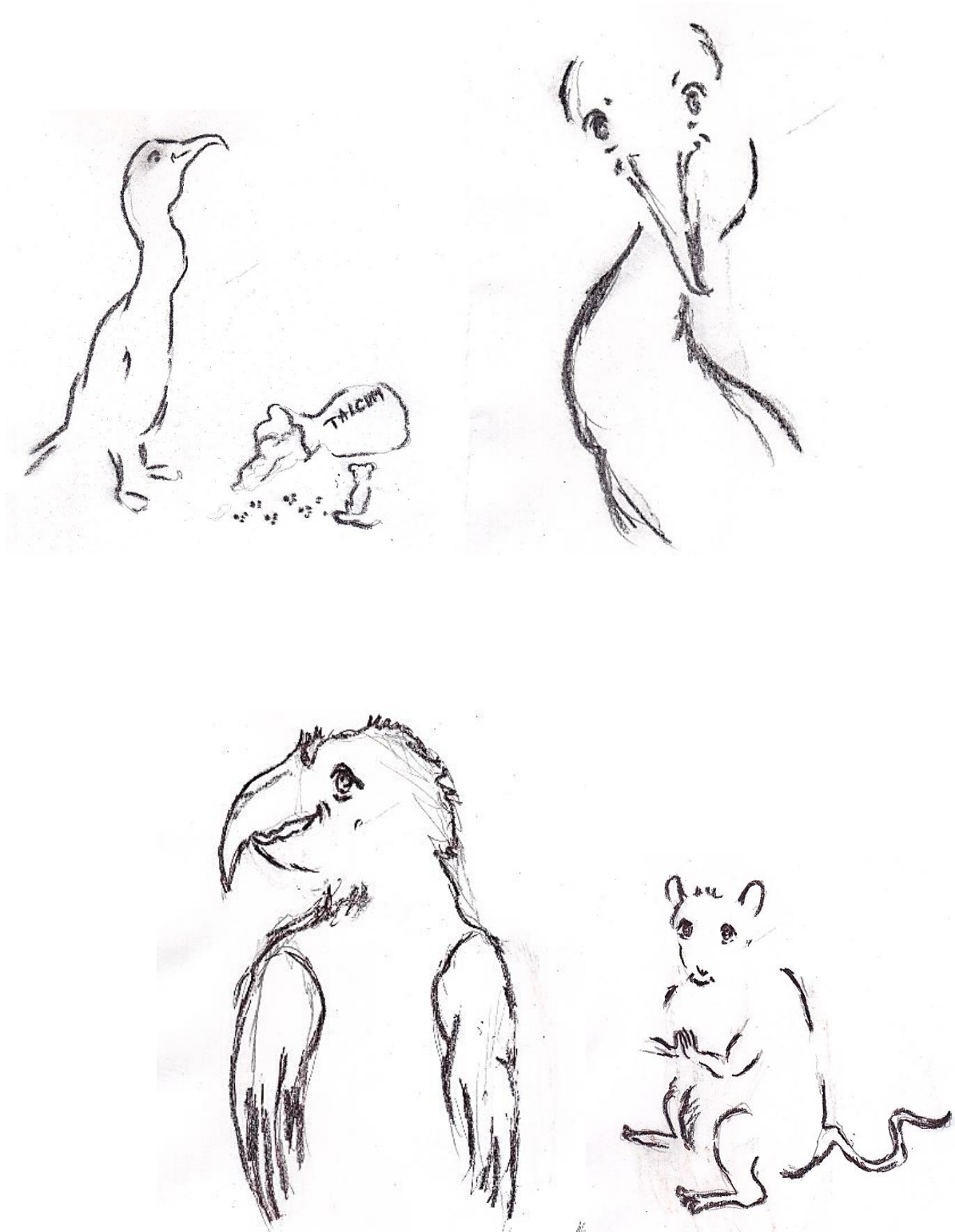




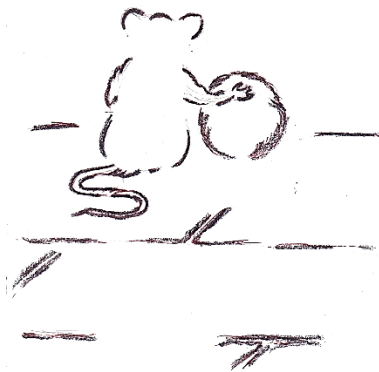
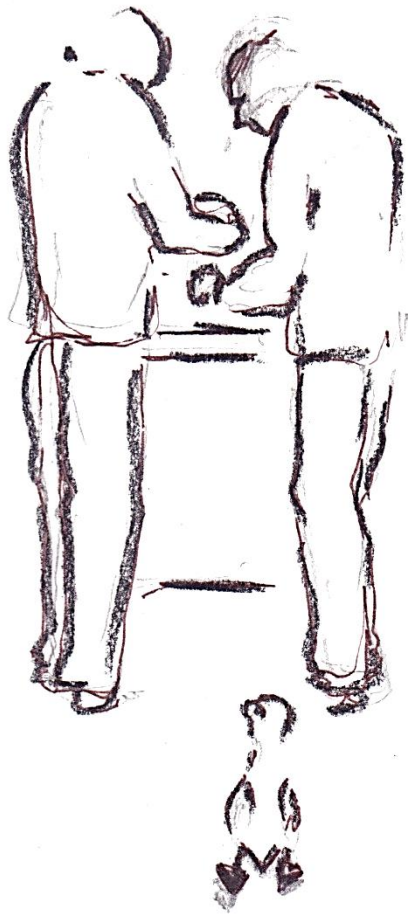
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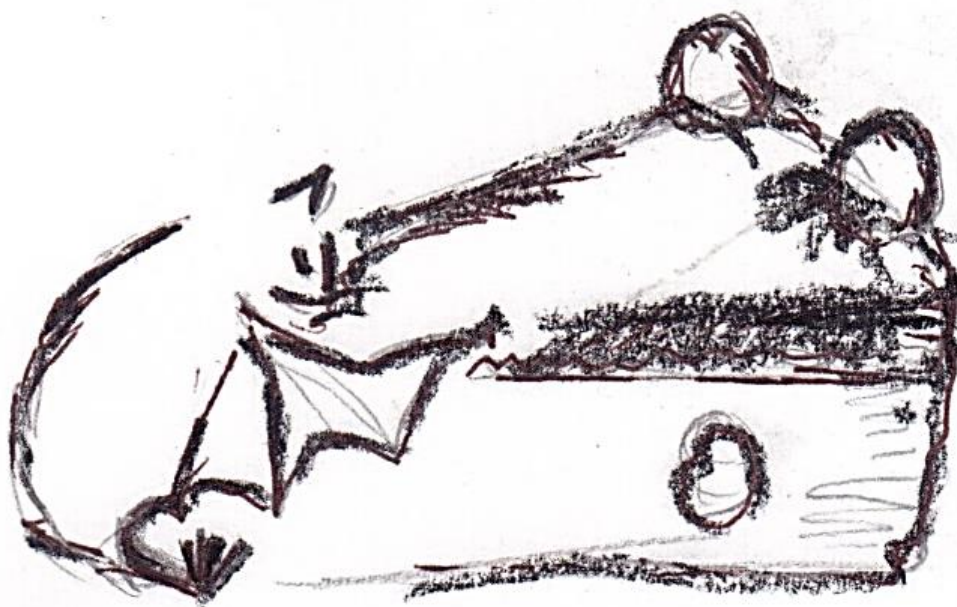
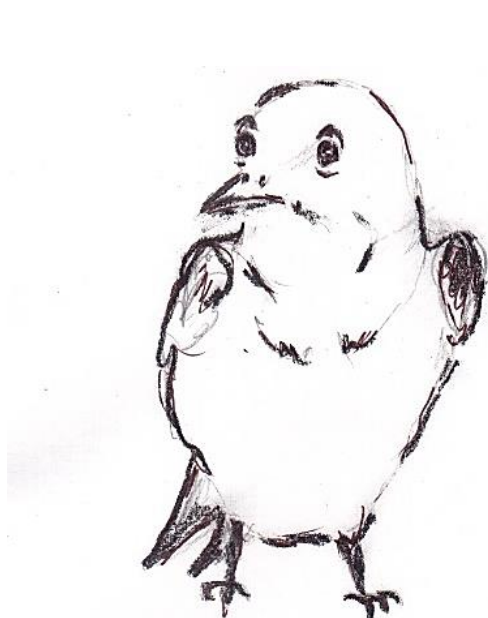
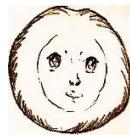
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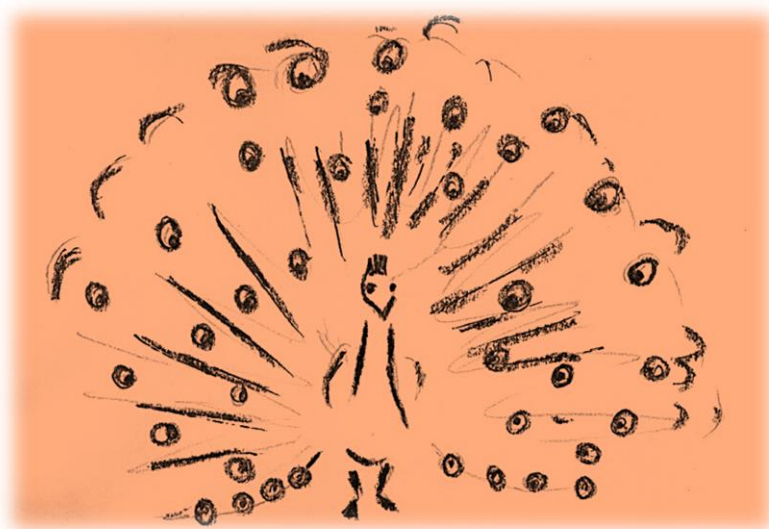
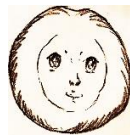
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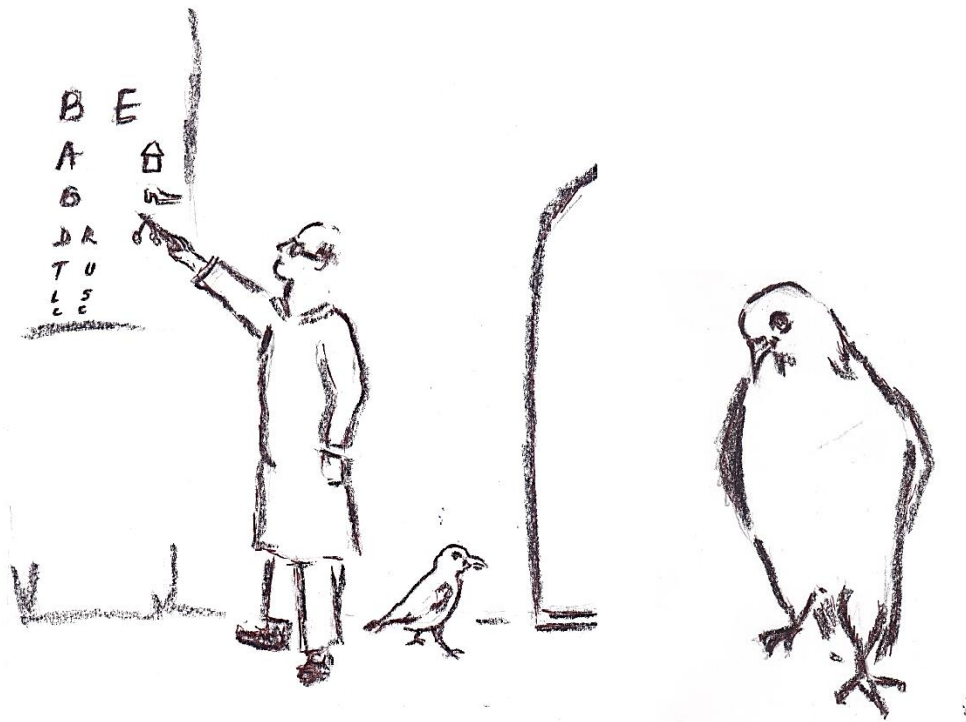
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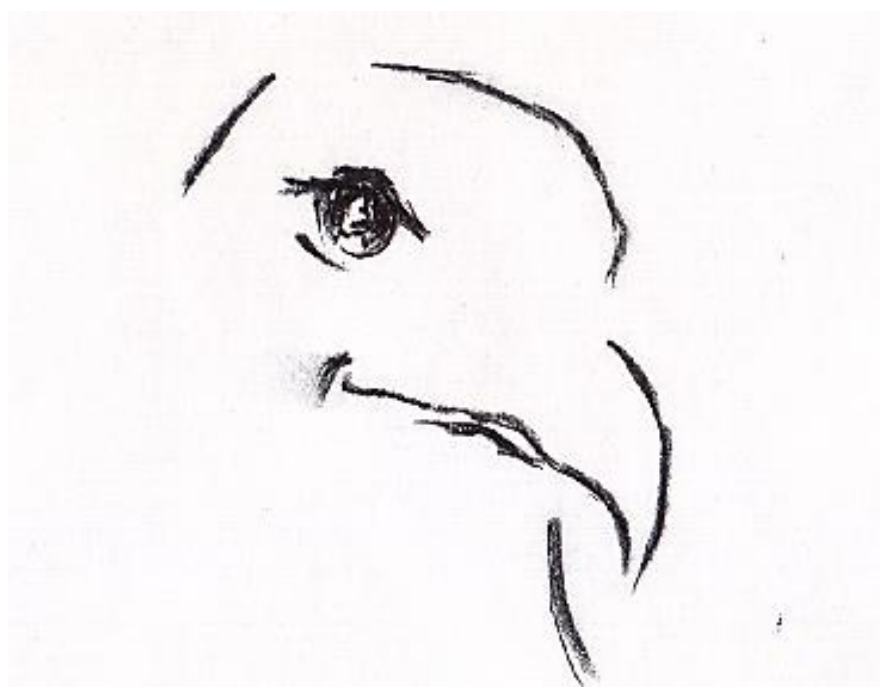
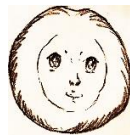
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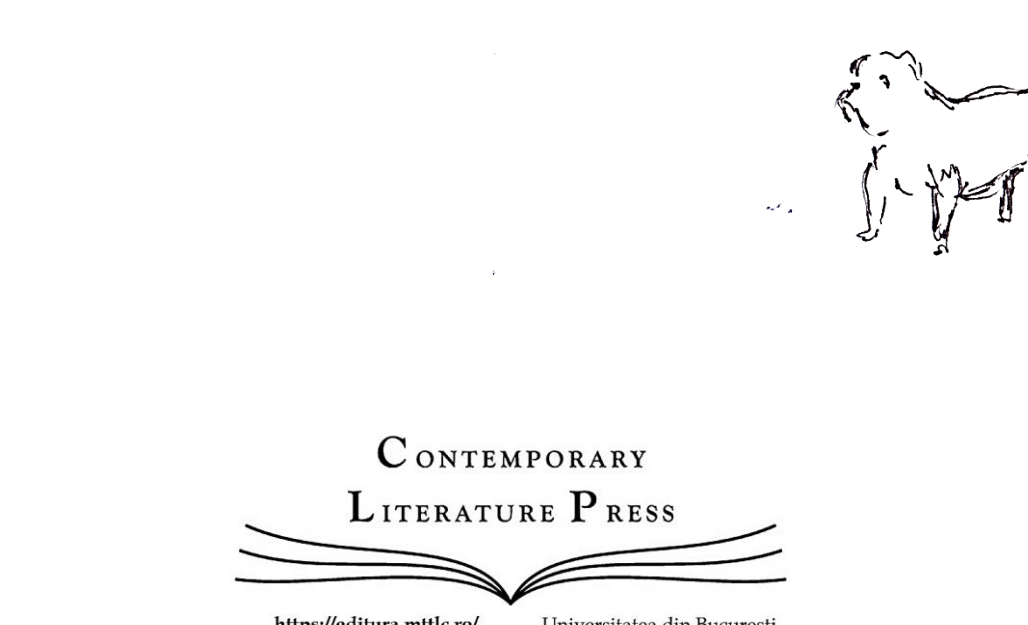
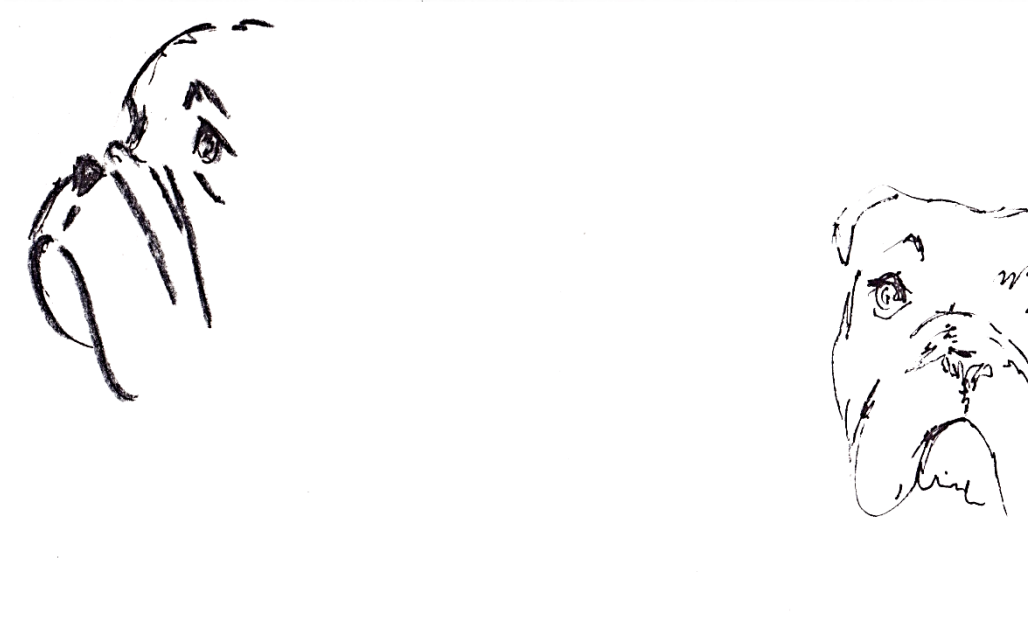
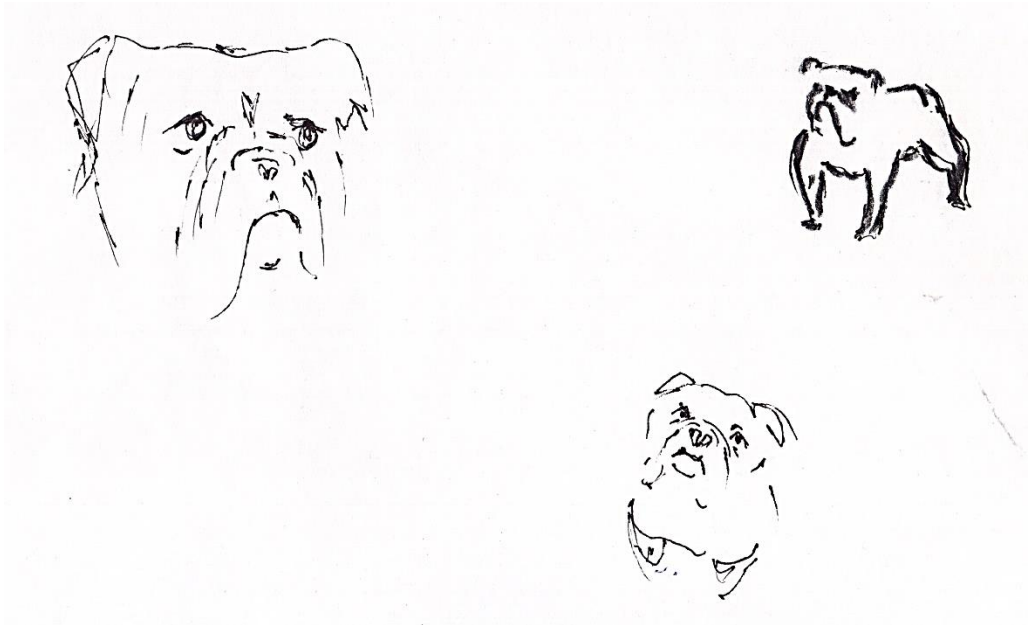


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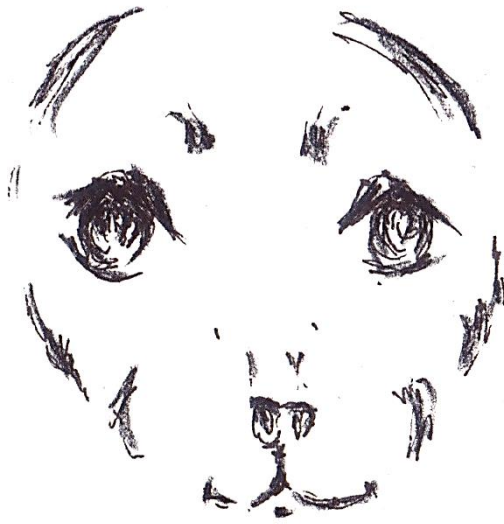
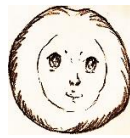




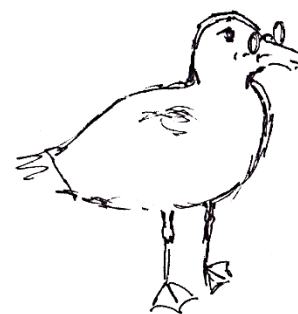
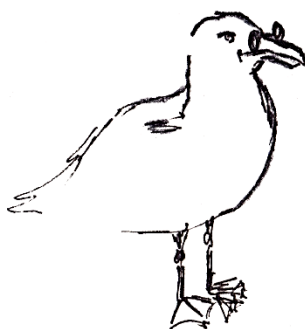
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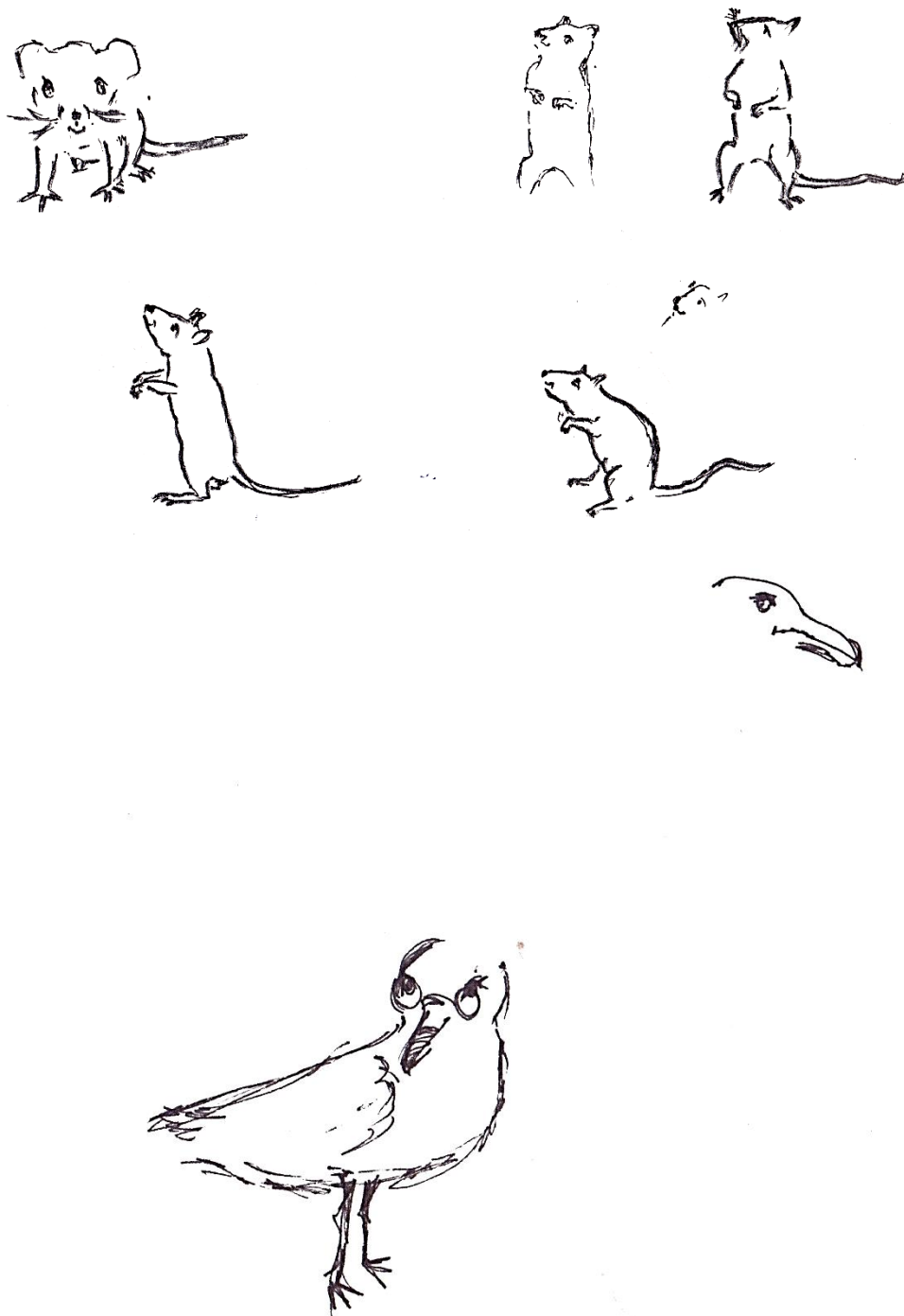
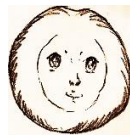
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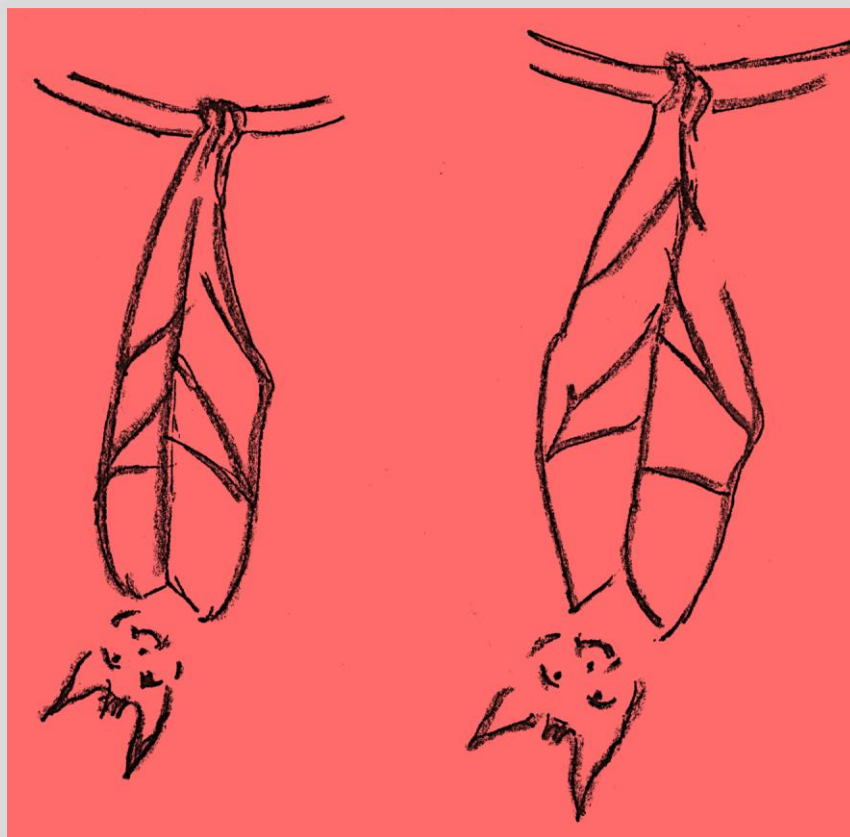
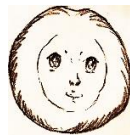
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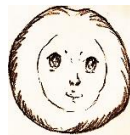
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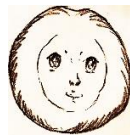
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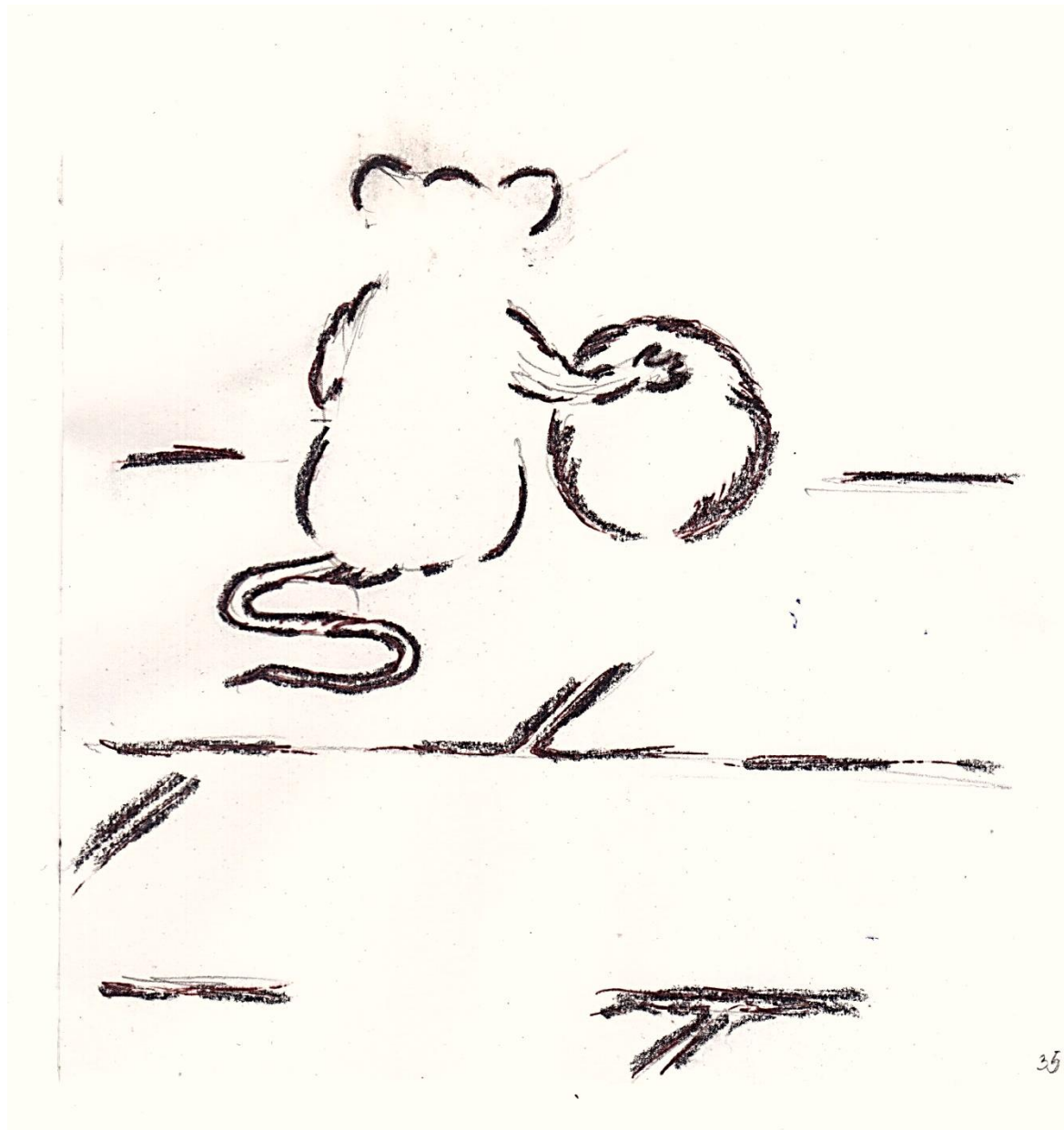
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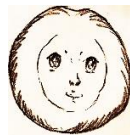


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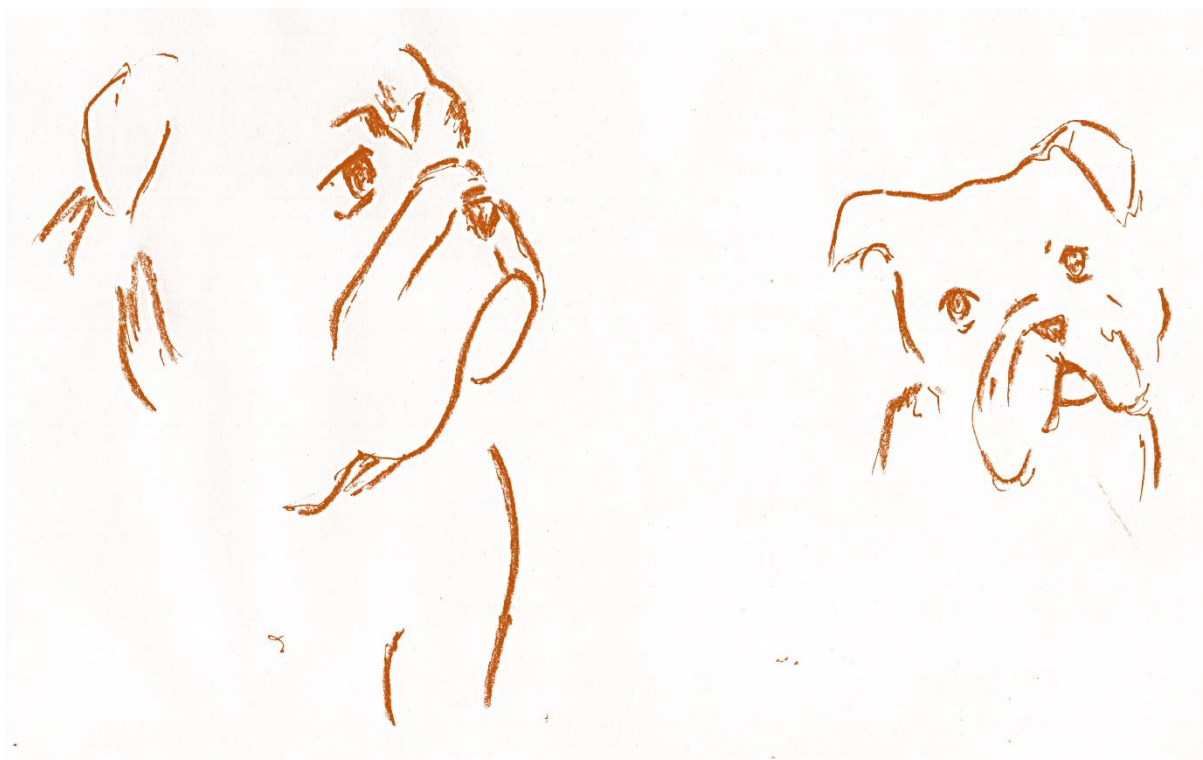
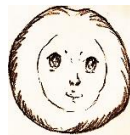
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